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The Tie-To Sport; or, High Hustling at Sinners' Flat.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," "FLIP-FLOP FRED," "THE HUSTLER ROGUE-CATCHER," ETC., ETC.



HE CAUGHT UP A LOOSE END AND BROUGHT IT AROUND UNDER THE SPORT'S NECK.

The Tie-To Sport;

OR,

High Hustling at Sinners' Flat.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," "THE HUSTLER ROGUE-CATCHER," "FARO FRANK," "CLEAN GRIT TO THE FRONT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A HOLD-UP ON THE MOUNTAIN.

"If you please, steady as you are."

The speaker was young in years, compared with his companion, but he was well advanced in the wisdom of this section of the world. He emphasized his words after the manner of the men around Sinners' Flat.

In his hand he held a revolver, the muzzle of which looked the other grimly in the face.

"Poor, dying mortal, is it with the weapons of the flesh you would menace one who would use no carnal sword, but pin his faith to the saber of the spirit? Put up that deadly tool, for I am a peaceable wayfarer, bound like thyself, if I mistake not, for the city of Sinners' Flat, and on a mission of brotherly love. I am known as Guyon James in other regions, though here the profane have sometimes called me Giant Jim. What might thine own name be?"

"John Jones," answered the younger man promptly; and then, after a brief pause, he added:

"But it ain't. Call me Dell Hammond and you won't be far wrong. You do look harmless, unless you are subject to fits, and I guess I can put up my gun for the present; but with a stranger as big as a meeting-house I'm not taking any chances. Till we are better acquainted you want to go mighty slow. It seems to me I have heard of you; and the boys have it that you're the Saint from Side Ace."

The larger man heaved a sigh as he responded:

"Verily—though I am but a sinful mortal like themselves, save that my wickedness runs not in the same direction. Truly, we seem to be known to one another, since Daisy Dell has been spoken of more than once in my presence as the Tie-To Sport."

It seemed to be a chance meeting, though Dell Hammond had thought the other had come upon him somewhat suspiciously, and had been ready for danger on the instant.

At this he gave a short though hearty laugh.

"You have it down fine, uncle. Without wishing to blow my own horn I am willing to say I'm a mighty good man to tie to. If there is any coin at Sinners' Flat I expect to gather it in in professional style and then go on to the next place."

"Beware thou art not gathered in thyself. Sinners' Flat, with which I have some acquaintance, is a hard place for men who live by table and card; and the lot on the hill is more than half full already. I have labored somewhat with some of its godless ones, after my quiet way, but it seems to have been in vain. Iniquity flourishes, and honest integrity goes to the wall."

"Let her go if she can't take care of herself," carelessly retorted Hammond.

"But while we are chinning here the sun is climbing down at a two-ten gait, and we stand a rank bad show of getting to the burg to-night. I intend to pull foot, and if you think you can keep up with the procession you may start along."

He glanced over the sturdy limbs of James, and smiled as he spoke. If his looks did not belie him the giant would not be far behind in a day of travel.

"Verily, it is not for fear of being out-

stripped that I do not accept the offer, but because it is time to take to the brush. The wicked are coming like unto roaring lions, and if thou hast not a desire to devour or be devoured it would be better for thee to do likewise."

The Tie-To Sport had already looked up with a quick glance, so that the warning came a shade late. At some distance up the trail, in the direction they had intended to proceed, there was a sound of hoofs, clattering toward them at a rapid rate.

"Thanks for the invitation, my friend, but I am not in the habit of running away until I know what it is I am running from."

"Nor of going into a fray until thou knowest what forces are on the other side?" suggested the giant, leisurely striding back into the bushes from which he had emerged a few moments before.

Daisy Dell looked dubiously after him.

"The blessed old crank!" he muttered.

"I don't believe I would trust him beyond reach of the turn of my wrist, yet he may not be altogether a fraud. And if not, there is something in his warning. Faith, I believe I'll follow in his footsteps. I feel it in my bones there is something around here that needs watching, and somehow the way those fellows are coming on sounds like real old business. There's too many of them to take in without leaving a bad taste in the mouth of Sinners' Flat, and I'm not ready yet to march over the range myself. Here we go."

Laughing somewhat at himself, yet touching the revolvers which hung handy at his waist, Hammond leisurely followed after Giant Jim, who seemed already to have found a secure hiding-place. Nothing was to be seen of him, and his footsteps were no longer to be heard.

Once behind the curtain of leaves and the sport was no longer in doubt as to which way to go.

There was something like a path, which led up an acclivity, and higher on there was a huge rock which might furnish a lurking place and a fortification. When Dell had reached this he found James lying prone by its side, craning his neck to peer down at the trail below.

None too soon was the retreat made, for hardly had Hammond dropped down by the side of the man when the horsemen came in sight.

Half a dozen of them there were, and they came straight forward to the very spot where the two lurkers had been standing but a moment or so before.

There they halted, and at a few low words from the man who rode foremost certain dispositions were made which told a story to the sport. The men dismounted, the horses were led out of sight on the opposite side of the trail, and it was easily to be seen an ambushade of some kind was intended.

"In truth, it looks as though they waited for the stage from Red Bend, which is due at this hour," whispered the giant, his whole huge body seeming to cower lower as he spoke.

"They mean it no good, but who are we that we should stop them?"

"True enough. I have been held up myself, and I notice that no one was chipping to save my getter. We have an elegant post from which to see the fun, but I don't reckon there will be much of it. Hark!"

Their low whispers hardly could be heard by each other, much less was there danger of the sounds reaching the ears they knew were below. And above all, there was a noise of turning wheels which would distract every ear. The coach was coming, as usual, on time.

The road to the spot was slightly rising, and the grade beyond was stiffer still. Right here would be the place where the pace would be slackened if the driver had breast-ed the ascent with anything like an attempt

at speed; and it would be almost impossible to suddenly urge his team to anything like a hurricane flight over the sharply rising ground in front. It was just a lovely place for the agents to get in their work, and so whispered the sport to himself.

Rapidly the stage from Red Bend neared the spot. Once, looking cautiously through the screen of leaves, Hammond caught a glimpse of the vehicle toiling up the rise after a fashion that told of a full load, and he marked the fact that it was no great distance. Before he could fairly settle back into position it would be within hailing distance of the ambush.

Uncertain what was to come, or of his own course when the crisis came, Dell Hammond's hand dropped to a weapon as he looked around to see what his companion was doing.

Giant Jim was doing nothing, yet there was something in his face, in the feverish anxiety which seemed to thrill his whole frame, totally different from anything the sport had expected to see. James might be a saint compared to the sinners of the town from whence he came, but there was nothing very lamb-like in his attitude just then.

He looked more like a tiger crouching for a spring.

"Bigger chance for fun than I had thought for," was the idea which darted through Hammond's mind; and then he heard the hail of a man whom he could not see, though he could have tossed a pistol-ball close enough to his location to be dangerous.

"You driver, thar, down brakes, an' up han's. This hyar are ther tax-getherer's office, an' ther galoot whot don't pony up goes down—hard."

There was a snort from the team, a noise of the break-beam being suddenly thrown over, and then a shrill, piping voice:

"Oh, say, Mister Man, can't yer put it off? We're in a hurry fur ther Flat, an' ain't no time fur sich ding-donged foolishness."

What answer there was to this Daisy Dell never knew. Something caused his eyes to dart upward with their glances, and he saw a distorted face with glaring eyes peering down from the top of the rock, and two claw-like hands which poised high above them a huge boulder. Which of the men lying there was it meant for, and when it came would it come to slay?

CHAPTER II.

THE GRIT OF A WOMAN.

NEVER before had the Tie-To Sport seen the face, and at that moment he would have cheerfully missed the sight altogether so that its owner was miles away.

Lying there as he was it seemed impossible he should spring aside in time to avoid the coming missile, while it was just as impossible to take a snap-shot with the hand which clasped a revolver, or change the weapon to the other, which at that moment was resting upon the ground, and supporting a good share of his weight.

Besides, if sudden lightning should blast the being above him the boulder would still come down.

Further still, there were the outlaws upon the trail, whom he did not care to call to the spot. For once he hesitated in a moment of danger—and saw the huge rock leaving the claw-like hands, and darting downward, straight for his brain.

And then, over him reached a pair of stout hands, which caught the coming missile as though it had been a toy, and though they swung perilously near they did not touch the head of the endangered sport.

The stone was softly placed upon the ground, and for the instant the danger was over.

What was to come next?

Dell's revolver had changed from one

hand to the other, and now swung up, but as it dropped to line the glaring eyes above vanished, and before the sport could spring to his feet there was a noise, slight but certain, telling his unknown assailant had slipped hastily down the opposite face of the rock, and was even then in full retreat.

He would have leen up to follow but the hand of Giant Jim closed upon his coat-sleeve.

"That danger is over, why tempt another? Truly, he is already beyond the reach of thy pistol—though it would not be hard to bring hither yonder outlaws, to take thee within the range of theirs."

The sport nodded and sunk down again.

He could be cool as the coolest; and besides, he recognized the truth of what his companion was saying. But as he regained his old position his eyes rested upon the boulder which now lay between them.

"Fifty pounds if an ounce," was his thought.

"Who flung it, and why was it thrown? And what sort of a man is this who plays with such things after such a fashion? When I have time to do it I may as well be asking for answers to those questions. Just now—there's business on the trail, and I'm not so sure I'll not take a hand in, after all."

The bit of by-play had caused the sport to lose something of the conversation, but when he listened again the outlaw leader was speaking in a tone that was stern:

"Enough ov that! Git down an' out, an' that mighty full suddin, er thar will be quick death, an' no end ov funerals. You, in thar! Better hustle out that galoot ez are doin' all ther talkin' ef you don't want ter all go up t'er flume tergether."

"Nothin' like cheek!" the individual of the piping voice flung back at him.

"I jest wanted ter know how it war a-strikin' you. Bless yer souls! I ain't nothin' ter lose, an' I ain't too proud ter come down when I cain't stay up. Hyer I are—ther roarin' lion ov ther archipelergoes. Don't be shocked when yer sees who's bin doin' all v this chin, fur ef I'm leetle I'm good, an' when me pards don't hold ace, face ner trump I know it can't hurt ter go it alone. Look sharp, an' hyer we are."

Out from the coach came the speaker—and he came something after the fashion of a rubber ball.

A dark, round object seemed to shoot up into the air.

It dropped elastically to the ground, where it turned over and over several times, and then resolved itself into a grinning youngster, who threw out his hands from his lips in a regular circus salute as he touched the ground, and faced the agents.

"Billy Jingle, gents all, ther leetle sinner frum Side Ace, on his way ter taste a bigger one he's jest heared ov at Sinner's Flat. Ef you must work through ther hull program, sail in. I ain't a-hinderin' no longer. But do it quick an' decent er I may hump me back, an' put ther brand on."

Daisy Dell was certain the man at his side gave a start at the appearance of the lad.

He noticed it because he would have sworn nothing earthly could have upset the strange individual.

He was surprised himself, because he had thought the querulous tones belonged to a decrepit old man, but he felt sure it was not this which caused the movement by Giant Jim. Both from Side Ace—surely they were no strangers to each other.

"Great grizzlies!" ejaculated the spokesman of the outlaws.

"I've heared ov a old head on young shoulders afore this, but I dunno ez I ever seen it. You stan' ter one side tell bizzness are over, an' be mighty keerful how you cut up too many monkey shines. We'll 'tend to you later on. Jest now, time's a-pressin', an' thar's a big stroke ov work ter

be wrestled with. You, in thar, foller yer leader. We want yer all hyer in a row, an' ther sooner yer git thar ther easier we'll try ter make it fur yer when we pass 'round ther hat."

After that there was no delay. The ice once broken and the passengers began to scramble out by the door which Billy Jingle had thrust open.

There was no mistake about the stage having a full load, and it made quite a flock when the passengers were all bunched together, with Billy on the extreme right. The last two persons to descend were evidently of the sex feminine.

"Stiddy, as ye are now," commanded the spokesman.

"Deacon Jones will perceed ter take up ther colleckshun, an' ef ary individ' onder-takes ter retire with filthy lucre on his person thar will be suthin' he didn't think war sot down in ther bills. You are all kivered thick ernuf with Winchesters fur a cold winter night, but in cases ov obstinacy we jinn'rally use a rope. Sail in, Jonesey."

"A pretty good imitation, but not exactly the real thing," mused the sport in ambush as he listened with interest to this harangue.

"He may be a road-agent, sure enough, but that's not the lingo he is used to using. Very well done it is, yet I have stamps that say I'll know his voice if I ever hear it again. But what is that to me? Dell Hammond is not posing as a hero to-night, and I wish they would hurry the circus over so I can be moving."

It would have been possible enough to have flanked the outlaws while they were engaged with their work, but the sport never thought of that. Much as he seemed to begrudge the time, he was bound to see the thing out, while Giant Jim appeared to be of the same opinion, and was as silent and motionless as the rock beside which he lay.

The outlaw addressed as Deacon Jones followed orders to the letter.

Hat in hand he advanced to the left of the line, and held out the battered tile.

Though there were three or four rifles frowning at the thoroughly cowed passengers the fellow held a revolver in his other hand, and as he presented the hat the muzzle of the weapon came into line, while he growled out a low warning which sounded like the sure enough thing.

There was no hesitancy, either.

One man after another dropped in his contribution, and it came in such shape it seemed to be all he had.

Finally, Jonesey came to the females.

The first was a woman fully of middle age, portly and well-dressed. With a low and briefly uttered snarl she threw in a wallet which she drew from the bosom of her dress, and as it left her hand she clinched the fist from which it had dropped, and shook it angrily at the road-agent.

"Much obleeged, mum. Hard words don't hurt, an' when we rech Cannan I'll drink to yer better luck an' better looks. Next!"

The remaining passenger was the youngest of all, save Billy Jingle, and was sobbing audibly.

In her hand she held a little purse, and it seemed to the Tie-To Sport, even from that distance, it was none too well filled.

With one hand covering her face she dropped her mite, and then, as though overcome with emotion, fell back a pace, throwing her thus a trifle to the rear of the line.

From a girl of her caliber resistance was scarcely to be expected, and Jonesey paid no attention to the movement. He turned to the boy, who was carelessly awaiting him, with his hands well extended over his head.

"Bring ther hat hyer," interrupted the leader, who had moved back a little, and was standing by himself at the side of the trail.

"Let's see ther size of ther donations.

We kin tell then to a dollar ef it's wuth while ter turn things upside down. I s'pect Meg Brandon hez a leetle nest aig held back in ther leg ov her stockin'."

The portly female scowled darkly but held her peace. It was no great surprise that her name was known, and she was wise enough to understand that no outcry could help her.

"Won't do, Meg," continued the agent, as he glanced over the collection in Jonesey's hat.

"Go down fur it. We want ther rest."

Meg gave a snort of anger.

"You got my last ducat, Captain Brand, if that is your name, and if you are white you won't try to play rough with a lady. It won't do you good in the long run."

"No. You have a longer arm than ther gerloots ov ther camp give ye credit fur, an' some day ye may hev a chance ter buy me out an' see me over ag'in; but all ther same—empty yer stockin', er we'll hev ther young lady doin' it fur ye. No one kin say thet Captain Brand war ha'sher ter a female than he hed ter be; but this hyer shenanagin are too thin."

Dell Hammond's interest began to grow deeper. What was the meaning of this, and how would it end?

The woman stooped as though conquered. Then she partly straightened, thrust out her hand, and there was the sharp report of a pistol, fired point-blank at the leader of the road-agents.

CHAPTER III.

WARNED AND SURPRISED.

MEG BRANDON pulled her pistol with the steady speed of one to whom fire-arms were no strange thing. Though she never lingered on her aim it is more than likely the shot would have gone home had it not been for an interruption least looked for.

For all his careless look Billy Jingle was keeping a keen watch, and as Meg's pistol came up he took a single step, and his hand shot out, striking her sharply on the wrist as she pulled trigger.

The muzzle of the weapon went up, and the bullet flew high over the head of the man at whom it was aimed.

The failure appeared to take away her courage.

Without waiting for another shot Meg wheeled and started to fly.

Though final escape might not have been possible it is certain she would have got a fair start of the astonished outlaws had it not been for Billy.

He was active as a cat, and could move three feet to the woman's two. In three bounds he had outstripped her, and cast himself directly in her path, throwing her headlong.

She came down on him something like a mountain on a mouse, and if he was not crushed it was because he had looked for what happened, and arched himself to sustain the shock.

"Sorry, mum, but it's a down grade, an' ef they hed 'bergun ter shoot at you they would 'a' hit us; an' I ain't so ding-donged sure ez I hev my callin' an' 'leckshun sure. Better hand over an' be did with it."

The shock to the woman turned out to be a heavy one, and the breath was almost knocked out of her.

Gasping, she rose to a sitting posture, and in her hand held out a folded paper.

"Take it," she managed to utter.

"How the Hades you knew I carried it I can't say, and it will do you no good now that you have it. If there was a chance to win I'd fight you tooth and nail, but—no! No!" she suddenly broke off.

"I give up! See! There lies my pistol, and here is what you want. You would not harm a woman!"

The report of half a dozen rifles would hardly have terrified her as much as what she saw. With a brace of revolvers pointed her way the captain was stepping forward, while by his side walked a man with a rope, in which he was just knotting a running noose, and looking upward at a stout limb which overhung the side of the trail.

"I dunno ez you orter be called a woman, you ole she-wolf," grated the captain.

"Try another trick an' we'll hang you high ez Haman—I ain't sure but what we'll do it yit. Le'mme see."

He caught the paper from her hand and gave it a hasty glance.

"Yes, I reckon you got down ter bedrock at last, an' we can't ask more from you this trip. Lucky all 'round thet this kid hed sense ernuf ter see what war ter be done, an' grit ernuf ter do it. I want a leetle talk with him, ter see ef thar's ary way Captain Brand kin show he kin be grateful, an' ther rest ov you kin be pilin' in ther hearse."

There was no waiting for this permission to be repeated. Without any attention to the rule of gallantry the male passengers scrambled back to their seats, followed first by the younger and then by the elder of the females.

The latter, as she entered the coach turned and shook her fist at the outlaws in a savage but silent burst of wrath. No one paused to consider or care what was to become of Billy Jingle. The captain had led him a trifle to one side and held with him there a brief conference. When he too crawled into the coach his face was full of smiles, but he said not a word.

"Now, Johnny, crack yer whip!" laughed the captain, and without any apparent fear of the passengers whom he was leaving to their own devices he and his men suddenly disappeared by the same route which Dell Hammond had seen them take upon their arrival. Their horses were hidden somewhere in the covert, and though they did not reappear there was evidence the animals had not turned up missing. In a few moments the departing beat of hoof-steps could be heard along the trail below.

Johnny was willing enough to crack his whip; but he was too prudent to try it on till some temporary repairs had been made. A knife in the hand of one of the outlaws had made bad work with his harness, and there was considerable tying to do before he thought the harness would stand the strain of the up-grade.

In the midst of his labors he became aware there was a stranger on the spot.

Without worrying himself about the possible suspicions his appearance at such a time and place might give rise to, Dell Hammond stepped coolly into the road, and after a careless glance in the direction taken by the road-agents approached the vehicle.

The explanations he offered were brief, and he said nothing of the man he had left behind him in the shadow of the rock, but while he dexterously assisted Johnny to tie a knot here, and fit a buckle there, he put in an application for the vacant seat on the driver's perch, and his plea was not rejected.

The result was that when the coach came rolling into the Flat the Tie-to Sport was with it. It did not matter to him that some of the other passengers thought he was a coward, while others were sure he belonged to the band of Captain Brand. He had saved a weary old walk, and felt himself abundantly able to paddle his own canoe in case he found he had thrust himself into deeper waters.

The ride was rather a pleasant one, for it did not take him long to get on friendly terms with the driver, and though he could not see much of his fellow-passengers Johnny was able to tell him a good deal about some of them, besides posting him as to the condition of affairs at Sinners' Flat.

"The lady ov size? Oh, yes," he responded in answer to a question.

"Meg Brandon are ther name we know her by, an' in her time I reckon she has been a daisy, though she is passing along in years, an' don't pan out fur good looks quite ez strong as she used ter did. All ther same, with her Sunday harness on, silks and streamers, diamonds and sich gewgaws, she kin hold her own yit. An', stranger—"

"Which my name is Dell Hammond," laughingly interposed the sport.

"All right. I'll jot it down. But, ez I war goin' ter say, she knows how ter run ther "Gates ov Glory" s'loon clean up ter natur'."

"Ah, that comes my way, at last. Something to be done there with the pasteboards, I take it?"

"Everything—if you have ther gift, an' ther luck's on your side. But mostly they play it ther other way. Oh, ther sheekels she hev raked in are jest wonderfulter think 'bout. An' stra—Mister Hammund, I mean—I wouldn't be a wonderin' ef she was goin' ter rake in some ov yourn. Thar's ther look ov a sport in ther twist ov yer eye, an' I sh'd say yer war llerable ter go whar thar war the show ter rake in ther biggest pile."

"Right you are. When I can strike a square game without a limit I am happier than pigs in clover."

"And how about the other female? Does she travel under Meg Brandon's wing?"

"That's whar you'll find it, but you want ter go slow on kickin' when yer loses, fur Ante Ben an' some ov ther other heelers ez trains under her flag are holy terrors when she r'iles. An' fur ther other bit ov caliker, you can't prove nothin' by me. She's a stranger ter ther Flat, an' ef she warn't, from her looks I jedge she wouldn't be goin' thar. No one lookin' fur her down thar er they would 'a' asked me ter keep an eye out fur her. An' it's a scand'lous fact thet ther Flat are a bad place fur an innercent, onpertected female. Thar's boys thar, mind yer, ez are white; but they's others ez b'long down berlow, an' jest come up hyar fur a sort ov summer vacashun."

"Then the town is equal to its name and reputation. So much the better. I see I am not going to be disappointed in the place. And that little fellow, with the squeaking voice. Does he belong about here?"

"Nuther stranger ter ther Flat; but I reckon he can hoe his own row. But Meg won't be apt to be his best friend. Ef I war him I would steer wide ov ther 'Gates ov Glory,' er they may open fur him in good earnest."

With such sort of conversation had the way been beguiled, and when the stage drew up in front of Decker's Hotel, Hammond had acquired more knowledge of the town than some men would have gained in a week.

As he had the advantage in position he was the first passenger to the ground, and as he moved away some one brushed by him so sharply he took a more than passing glance at the individual.

"Looks like a steady-going miner, but you can't sometimes almost always tell. Hellow!"

The mental exclamation was caused by the fact that as Simon Decker, bluff and ready for trade, began his task of helping the passengers to alight, the first out was the young lady passenger.

And the man who had brushed past Hammond was coming eagerly forward to claim her.

He halted at her side, touched her on the shoulder, and bent forward to whisper something in her ear.

The girl looked up with a start, and was inclined to draw away, but what the man said appeared to reassure her. She nodded, uttered a few words in a low tone, and the two walked off together.

For the first time Hammond had a fair glance at the face of the young lady.

He started forward as though intending to speak, then drew back again, though he followed the pair with his eyes until they passed out of sight. As far as he could see they were making their way out of town.

"Dollars to cents, the man is a scoundrel!" muttered the Tie-To Sport to himself.

"I'll swear he is under cover, in disguise. Shall I, or sha'n't I? Yet, what right have I to interfere at this stage? If there is a scheme on foot I'll know it in time, and you bet I'll be elected, as usual, for a leading part on the other side."

Again he made as though he would follow, but felt a tug at his coat-sleeve.

"Eyes open, stranger, an' fingers full," whispered at his side the squeaking voice of Billy Jingle.

"Ef they git ther chaince they'll down yer, an' down yer hard. Billy Jingle'll be 'round ter siap ther brand on, but among ther sinners ov ther Flat mebbe even he can't save yer."

Then Billy skipped into the hotel, while the sport gravely followed, never showing by word or look that he heard the warning.

CHAPTER IV.

SAINT AND SINNERS.

THE Tie-To Sport did not expect too much in a town like Sinners' Flat, and therefore was rather astonished when, a few hours after his arrival, he stepped into the Gates of Glory Saloon, and moved along with the tide which flowed toward the bar.

After what he had heard from the driver, that it would be prosperous went without saying, but he hardly expected to find such a well-furnished and thoroughly appointed place.

"If the madame owns all this she is pretty well heeled," was his thought as he looked around.

"Everything first quality, and spick and span as a new pin. I don't see how she keeps it so, and holds her custom. The kind of a crowd that gathers at Sinners' Flat ought to turn it into a pig-pen before the night is half over, and if she tried to shut off the steam I should think they would kick, or go somewhere else. It suits me to a charm, but I shouldn't think it would be the place the boys would like to have fun in."

Nevertheless, he saw plenty of rough-looking cases there, and they were enjoying themselves.

If he had been there in the early days of the Gates he might have seen some of that kicking he was thinking about. In those times they knew less at the Flat about Meg and her men at arms, and it required some sharp lessons before the rank and file could be induced seriously to listen to her.

After that, Meg had her own way, except when there was general *emeute*, which did not happen there very often. She did not object to a little noise, and a bit of horse-play; but she did to having things broken, or too much of a litter made on the floor.

The center of the frolic just now was none other than Billy Jingle, who occupied a cleared spot in the middle of the bar-room. He had finished piping off a rollicking song, and strange though his voice ordinarily sounded, when he sung there was a good deal of music in it.

When the applause which greeted his efforts had a little subsided he began a breakdown, executed with a skill and precision that showed he was as skillful in the use of his heels as of his tongue.

After that, he passed around his hat, and received liberal offerings from every direction.

If he had not already shown to the sport that he possessed plenty of cheek, Hammond might have thought Billy did not

know into whose ranch he had come, for after the way he had thrown up Meg Brandon's hand, and assisted in her capture, it might be supposed she would have no love for him, and would hardly be willing to tolerate his presence.

Still, she was not visible, and it might be he wanted to make his harvest before she came to the front.

As he passed the sport the boy gave him an odd glance, and muttered:

"That war straight goods I war givin' yer. Look a leetle out."

"I'm a-looking," returned Dell, airily, as he tossed a coin into the extended cap. "Looks as though you might have been taking lessons from Captain Brand, but this show is worth the money. You better keep an eye open yourself. A wink from the madame when she arrives and there would be trouble in the air for one small boy."

"Thankee fur nothin'. Ef I can't hold my end up I'll call on me pard. Sabbe?"

"Don't call too loud, then, and maybe they will hear you," retorted the sport, as he turned toward the bar. He was just about to name his vanity there when his attention was attracted by a hubbub near the door.

"Hyer's ther Saint!" shouted a voice.

"This time we got him sure. You can't fire and fall back," laughed another.

"Bring him along up, and we'll see if he has the stomach to sample some of the madame's benzine."

The burly form of Giant Jim could be seen, surrounded by half a dozen tormentors who without using any great roughness were hustling him along as well as they could. For some reason he had entered the saloon, and had been spotted at once.

He offered no resistance; neither did he seem to be either alarmed or indignant. Sadness there was on his face, however, and he simply appeared willing to find out how far they would work their wicked will.

In the briefest of times the crowd had him facing the bar, while the ringleader of the gang cried out sharply:

"Sling out your tumblers, Early Ike. Here is a gent that is quite a stranger to the Gates and we want to do the honors clear up to the nines. Your stiffest bug-juice, Ike. Nothing else will satisfy the Saint from Side Ace. And I'm not sure you have anything in the shop that will take hold at the right place."

"Money talks hyer," growled Ike, surveying the crowd suspiciously. "If the gent wants good lick it must be paid for according. I want to know how many are going to irrigate, and see coin enough in the distance to make it a safe investment."

"Oh, bosh!" retorted the fellow. "If you don't believe Mariposa Mike is good for all he calls for hyer's the collateral. Set 'em up to the extent of that. If any more want to drink with the Saint they will have to pay their footing. That's enough for this gang."

Mariposa Mike, as he called himself, flung down a gold coin without taking his fingers off of the shoulder of James, and it looked as though the hand which cast the coin was going to drop back to a revolver for it made a suspicious move in that direction.

For that Early Ike cared nothing. His eye had turned to the Saint, and as he saw nothing which looked like kicking there he passed down the bottle which held their fieriest brand.

One of the crowd seized it, and filled tumbler after tumbler as Ike swung them out. Each man grasped his glass, and a brimming one was left for Giant Jim.

"Now, Saintey, take your medicine and down it with the rest of us. It's not often you give us the chance, and we want to show you we are your solid friends. Down with it."

"Verily, friend, thou art much mistaken.

No pleasure does it give me to look on the wine; and for five years not a drop of the infernal poison hath passed my lips. Once I was that manner of a man, and therefore I understand the mistaken goodness in thy hearts. One of the will have to drink twice. I cannot, and dare not, indulge."

Very mildly did the Saint offer his refusal, but it was received with a show of anger, real or pretended.

"Drink first and preach afterward. Turn up your tumbler now and we'll hear your sermon; but don't monkey with the sinners when they have you foul."

A glint of fire came into the eyes of the Saint, and he shut his lips tightly. The Tie-To Sport, who was watching the scene with interest, was not sure whether it was the insult or the temptation which called it there.

He shook his head gravely, and then stood motionless.

"Drink!" more sternly still ordered Mariposa, his hand going, this time, all the way to his revolver.

"Verily, no!"

"Then—drink, or croak, and make your choice infernal quick," and the pistol of Mariposa Mike flashed out, its muzzle coming up till it almost touched the nose of the man from Side Ace.

The giant folded his arms across his breast and looked reproachfully at the threatener.

"Verily, the rope is all twisted and ready for such sinners as thou. I desire not to go over the range, but life and death are not of my giving, and I could not go in a nobler way than resisting temptation. I drink not."

"Shoot, Mike, or give up your gun!" laughed some one on the outskirts of the crowd, imagining a dead-lock had come; but Dell Hammond, watching the proceedings with a coldly-professional stare, made up his mind there was something more in all this than appeared on the surface. Sinners Flat might be a rough place, but he hardly thought it one where it would be safe to shoot a man simply for refusing to drink when invited.

If he once became sure that it was, he rather thought he would have a word to say.

There were other men who seemed to have a worse opinion of the town, or a better knowledge of Mariposa Mike.

Though no one directly interfered, here and there a voice arose:

"Best go a little slow, there, Mike!"

"It's a shame. The old fool never chipped into another man's game, what does Mike want to chip into his for?"

"They may crowd the camp a leetle too hard ef they don't hold on."

It was evident Mike had a reputation for doing what he said, and not caring much what it was, either.

And he seemed to be an unhealthy man to interfere with, too.

But Mike did not intend to go to such extremities at once. The game was probably arranged beforehand.

While he held the attention of the crowd, as well as of his victim, the rest of his gang were quietly making ready, and, as if at some preconcerted signal, they threw themselves suddenly upon the Saint from Side Ace, and endeavored to bear him to the floor.

CHAPTER V.

ONE GAME CLOSED AND ANOTHER OPENED.

If Mariposa Mike and his allies wanted to unchain a cyclone then and there they succeeded in doing it.

There was not time for them even to view the "black, funnel-shaped cloud" of wrath which few but Daisy Dell saw rising in the danger quarter of the compass.

Half a dozen men on one—then, it seemed the one was on the half dozen.

Once around he turned, with a wave of strength that swept up every one within reach into his grasp. Whether they stood behind him or in front made no difference, for he reached them all, gathering them up, and flung them in one confused heap on the floor.

The dead-lock was not only broken, but Mike no longer held the drop.

When his friends swung into action he lowered his gun, as though its threatening muzzle was no longer needed, and now, to his surprise, the drop was on him.

With a deftness that was an overwhelming surprise the giant shook a revolver out of some unsuspected hiding-place and thrust it full into the face of the ringleader of the crowd.

"Call off thy hounds!" he shouted, in a thunderous voice.

"Thou hast tried to do even worse work than could be dreamed of by such as thee and thine. Sooner than have it accomplished I would slay all who would have a hand in it and then turn this muzzle against myself. Up hands or die!"

The Saint from Side Ace had been badgered before, and had accepted the chaffing of the sinners with a mildness in keeping with his title. Now, he was worse than any sinner of themselves.

Mariposa hesitated.

He had been a chief among the sinners so long that such a defeat seemed almost an impossibility. Had he not been quick to realize the desperate earnest in which the order was given he would have turned the weapon he still held. But the blazing eyes were looking him through and through, and he was aware the least motion of an offensive kind would be the signal for his death.

"All right, Saintey, you have me," he answered, forcing a laugh.

"Put up your tool and move along. We will allow you to go dry. It was all a bit of rough play, and it won't do to make too serious a thing out of it. We might end by musing the floor."

"Call off thy hounds, then, before they fare worse. If but a drop of that accursed fluid had passed my lips, by this time they would have been past praying for. Men call me a saint, now, in derision, but if I fought not against it with soul and mind your poison would turn me into a devil."

While he spoke he was keeping watch not only of Mike, but his pards, some whom were beginning to rise from the floor.

"Steady, boys, the fun's over. We bit off more than we could chew, and each one had better spit out his mouthful, and wait for another time to take a fresh start."

"Ez you say, pard," laughed one of the fellows, apparently not at all in a bad humor over the defeat.

"We wanted ter see what war [in ther galoot, an' we found out, orful suddint. That's good ernuf fur me. I ain't settin' up fur a chief."

"That's right," added another. "He had the fun and we got the experience. A hog wouldn't ask to have any better. Nevertheless, ef he *would* take a drink—"

The fellow looked at the Saint in such a comical way as he uttered the invitation that there was a general roar from those who had crowded up again now the danger of a shooting scrape seemed to be over.

"The fun is over, gents, and Jim the Giant comes out jaybird," added Mike, with a wave of the hand; and at last the Saint turned in one direction, and he and his pards in the other.

Nevertheless, there was a look in the face of the man from Mariposa that gave token he had been cut deeper than he chose to let on. It was possible the end of the horse-play had not really come yet.

"Sensible Saint, after all," was Ham-

mond's thought, as he saw his late companion on the mountain pass out through the door.

"But what did he come in for? I begin to think he is a deeper man than he looks. If I had the time I might try to find out, and like as not the knowledge will come in my way, anyhow. I doubt if I am done with him yet."

As he turned away toward the gambling-room, which was reached through a curtained arch, he heard Billy Jingle, who had been silently enjoying the scene, tune up his pipes:

"A man may smile, a man may snarl,
A man may laugh or frown,
But though you hate the ground he treads,
Don't hit him when he's down.
I'm for the thing that's fair and square.
A man may fight the town,
Yet, if he falls my rule is this,
Don't hit him when he's down.
Don't hit him, don't hit him,
Don't hit him when he's down."

"A very good rule," thought Dell, as he dropped the curtain; "but I am afraid it is not the one which guides the sinners of the Flat. I have hardly had a taste of their quality yet, but the time will come, no doubt."

The little trouble in the bar-room had not disturbed the players, and Dell Hammond found the game in full blast.

Faro was the game, of course, but Madame Meg had no objection to short cards on the flanks. She knew that, after all, the money which changed hands at the poker tables would mostly find its way over her green cloth, provided luck ran her way.

Hammond was aware of this dispensation of fate, but was willing at any time to brave it when he could do nothing better. As he saw no one who looked as though he was anxious to try the stranger a hand at poker he advanced toward the lay-out. In another moment his money would have gone into a pile of chips when some one touched him lightly.

"Say, pard, while they are all too busy to look at a couple of strangers, what's the matter with you and me taking a quiet little game?"

"Nothing at all," was the hearty answer.

"You are just the party I am looking for. If we can't make it interesting for the rest of the world we'll make it interesting for our own two selves."

There was a vacant table in one corner of the room, and toward this the two made their way.

"And what do you say, pards, to counting me in, too?" asked a third party as they were taking their seats.

Dell looked up at the new-comer with an inward doubt.

The first challenger was a nattily-dressed individual, who looked the gambler all over, while this second person might be anything from a sharper or a crook to a mine-owner.

Hammond preferred dealings with the first class. He was always willing to meet a man who really intended to risk his money on the chances of the cards, but as a stranger in the town he knew it was not wisdom to have dealings with a sure-thing player, easily though he might foil his schemes.

"It's not my game," he answered without hesitation, however.

"Just as pard here says. For me, the more the merrier."

"Let us be merry, then," said the first comer.

"And call me Briggs—Charley Briggs. If I heard it right, around the hotel, your name is Hammond."

"And mine is Dave Johnson. Now, let's get right down to level work. I have good, cold dollars to risk on my luck and judg-

ment, and if either of you two gents can show the cards that lay over mine you can gather them in. What's the game?"

"Poker, of course," answered Dell, and opening a fresh pack of cards he threw around for deal.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBLY TRAPPED.

THE name of the young lady who came in on the coach from Red Bend was Stella Stone, and she had come to Sinners' Flat with a mission.

She had no idea any one would be interested in interfering with the success of that mission, and had thought very little of the chances of any personal danger.

The first bit of evil fortune on her journey was the encounter with the road-agents, and for the time being that was overwhelming. Her purse was none too well filled for the work in hand, and when her stock of coin vanished she was not certain how it could be replaced.

Still, she had a brave heart of her own, and resolved to put the best possible face on the matter. If she had to look for employment at the Flat she had little doubt she could find it. Her greatest sorrow was for the delay her penniless condition might cause in carrying on her quest.

For some time after the agents had disappeared, and the stage had begun to move, she remained crouched in one corner, paying no attention to what was going on, and revolving in her mind what course to pursue.

She had some little baggage with her, but it was uncertain whether the sight of it would be sufficient to obtain a night's lodging, or the meal she began to feel she needed worst of all.

After a while she put her hand mechanically into her pocket—and met with a surprise.

It seemed utterly impossible, and yet, she felt her purse back in its accustomed place.

Her first impulse was to draw it out and see if its contents were there as well.

A second's thought convinced her, however, that it would be better to say nothing. With one hand she opened it, and turning the contents loose in her pocket began to investigate.

She could feel beyond a doubt the little wad of bills which constituted the bulk of her funds, and the ten dollar gold-piece that had occupied a compartment by itself. In some mysterious way the purse and its contents had been returned to her.

After that, the encounter with the road-agents did not seem such a terrible thing, and she no longer dreaded the time when the coach should come to a halt at Sinners' Flat. She was again ready to continue her search for the missing man, her father.

When she dismounted she had no thought of meeting with any one who knew her, or of her. It was another surprise when a man with a totally strange face approached and asked if her name was not Stella Stone. She shrunk away from him while acknowledging that it was.

"All right, then. You are the young lady who wrote old Adam Druyer some time ago, telling him you were coming this way. You asked some questions that he didn't have strength enough to answer. And if he could have done so he would hardly have cared to put his answers on paper. To tell you by word of mouth is a different matter, and he sent me here to meet you."

"But where is he? Is it far to go? I am worn out with a long ride, with excitement. I must have some food and rest."

"You can't get them anywhere else better than you can at old Adam's. His woman can look after you—and you bet she won't see you suffer. If you want Adam to talk you better come now, while he's in the

notion for it. By and by he may close his fly-trap, or be too weak to chin if he wanted. Make up your mind quick; I just came to oblige Adam, but I've no time to wait. If you want to you can try and hunt him up in the morning—it's not far. But you may not find him living."

He spoke hastily and in earnest. Stella did not doubt that he was all that he said, and further hesitation was but momentary. She did not feel as tired as she had done, and no doubt there was information waiting for her that would be well worth the hearing.

She followed the man without misgiving, and when he told her Adam Druyer's cabin was less than a mile away she believed him.

She met but few persons on the way out from the town. They looked at her curiously, but hardly suffered their eyes to rest on her companion.

He seemed to be well acquainted with the place, and to several of those they passed he nodded after the manner of an old friend.

With the town behind their backs the way began to grow lonesome. It led up a gorge, where there were no habitations, and from the looks of the ground she decided that but few ever came that way, and no one ever worked there.

"Here's your cabin," he said, at length, and pointing with his finger she saw the door and little window of a dug-out.

The sight was not what she expected, and she felt frightened in spite of herself.

Yet it was no time to hesitate. From what the man had said Adam Druyer was an elderly man, and his wife a kindly woman. What matter if circumstances compel them to live in a hole in the ground. Perhaps that was only a proof of their honesty. She advanced without a word.

The door opened as she reached it, and she saw beyond a female form, clad in a dingy, calico dress.

"Come in, honey," squeaked the voice, and she entered with the man who had been her guide close at her heels.

Then the door swung to with a sound suggestive of solid strength, the man placed his back against it, while the woman crept toward her side, with a stealthy movement suggestive of a tiger.

"You will have to wait a bit, honey," whined the woman, while she was approaching.

"Adam has been took bad ag'in, an' we don't know ef he kin see you. I'll git you some supper, an' then, mebbe, he'll feel strong enough to talk, but it's terrible unsart'in."

Stella stared at her, scarcely hearing the words she uttered.

There was enough in the fierce face, and pantherish movements to put the girl on guard, and she would have shrunk away had there been any place to shrink to. There was no use to turn to her guide for aid, since she knew without a glance that he was no better than the woman.

He was bolder, though.

"Be done with that, mammy," he sneered. "You can't fool her with your cant, and she may as well know the truth right in the start."

"You want to listen to reason, little woman, and you want to salt it right down. We don't mean to do you any hurt unless you force us to it, but you don't come at just the most convenient time, and we want you to lie by till we are sure you can't do any damage."

"But—but what harm can I, or could I, do you, if you only let me alone? If trouble follows this it will be of your own making."

"That is all right. We will risk the trouble you can make for us long as we have you safe up in the hills. When we go we will see things are in such shape you can't come back to us. Take it easy, I tell you. Mammy, here, will get you some

grub, and I'd advise you to lay in a stock of it while you have the chance. You will have a long ride to make, and there's no stopping places along the route."

It was all well enough to tell her to take it easy, but she felt like raging, and if she did not do it, it was because, on the instant, she decided on her course, and was able to summon the nerve to keep to it.

Some little talk there was, and then, seeing her so calm, the woman brought out the provisions which were to serve as a meal, and the three did ample justice to them.

"No use for you to try to give us the slip, for there's a good man on the watch down the trail, and another on above. Till you try to cut up monkey-shines we won't bother tying you up, and if you want to you can lie down and rest till dark. It's not far off now, and when it comes we will move."

The advice was good, and Stella availed herself of the offered privilege. Though she expected to do no more than rest her wearied limbs she had hardly closed her eyes when she fell into a troubled sleep which lasted until she was awakened by a hand on her shoulder.

Then, it was up and away. Several horses were at the door of the dug-out.

"Without even giving her a chance to break away, her guide assisted her into the saddle, and then mounted himself. The old woman scrambled up on another horse without any assistance, and the trio set out, up the canyon.

Stella asked but few questions.

The curt refusal of answers stopped off the flood that might have been expected. It was enough to know she was a prisoner; and though promised gentle treatment so long as she made no effort at resistance or escape, she knew well what that might amount to.

What it all meant was a mystery. So far as she was aware all the world might know whatever concerned the life and death of Harold Stone, yet if this capture was not on account of her quest for him, or his remains, what could it mean?

There seemed to be but one course open to her. She must wait in patience to find out. Some time, perhaps, she might learn much more than she had ever dreamed of.

But the journey was fated to meet with an interruption. Suddenly, and from no great distance, there came a short, sharp warning and command:

"Stiddy, thar, an' han's up! Cap'n Brand wants ter know w'ot's goin' on hyer."

CHAPTER VII.

THE VAINNESS OF CAPTAIN BRAND'S WORK.

STEVE BRADLEY, Stella's guide, halted promptly enough at the challenge.

The drop was on him, and Captain Brand had the reputation of shooting quickly when his orders were not obeyed.

Stella hardly knew whether or no the interruption was agreeable. It seemed to her, somehow, that her purse was doomed. Once, in some miraculous way, it had escaped from the outlaws, and so far Bradley had showed no designs against it, but now it would probably have to go.

Still, it was likely that when they were robbed the road-agents would turn them loose, and she thought they would be willing to set her face in the direction of the Flat, and perhaps hold Bradley and the woman there until she had obtained a fair start.

To Bradley there was no redeeming feature in the case. He knew more about the gang, and they had an unpleasant way of putting their fingers into other people's pies, and extracting all the plums, and then acting harshly if there was any cutting up rough about it. In sullen silence he awaited what was to come.

The outlaw came out from the trail-side, and their weapons pointed in the same direction.

"Speak up, man, an' let us know what you war doin' hyer with that thar young lady in tow. Looks like ez though thar war some kind ov a game up thet Cap'n Brand wants ter take a han' in. Tell ther truth, er face ther devil."

"No game is there, at all. She wanted to find a man, and I agreed to bring her to him. I'm taking her there now, and that's all there is about it."

"And the man. It's a queer place to look for him."

"And a mighty queer man."

"His name."

"Don't know that his name counts much. He might kick if I was to begin to sling it around loose, up hyer."

"You'll find that it counts a heap ef you don't tell it mighty sudden. Thar won't be another time ov askin'."

"Adam Druyer, then, if you must know it. What she wants of him you must ask her yourself. I don't know."

"Is this hyer a true bill, young lady?" asked the road-agent, turning sharply to Stella, who had been listening without giving the least sign of concern.

"True as far as it goes. I started under his guidance, with the expectation of being led to the man he names but since then I have doubted whether he had any such intention at all."

"Has he treated you badly?"

"Not beyond a few threats which were enough to make me very careful how I acted for fear worse should come."

"Glad to hear it. It saves a hangin' match. Now, Mister Man, you hev finished your contract, an' brought ther young lady jest ez far ez she wants ter go. You continner ter keep yer han's up, an' take ther back track, ter wunst. I'll tend ter ther rest."

"Thank you for dismissing my false guide, but would it not do just as well if you were to allow me to take the back track, and keep him here until I was fairly on the way?"

Stella's interruption was useless. The outlaw coldly answered:

"Scassly. That may come later on, but jest now you've come so fur it'd be a dog-goned shame ef you war disserp'inted."

"It seems to me I am bound to be that, anyway," she answered, coldly watching the retreating figure of Steve Bradley, who had wasted no words, and was riding away with his hands holding the reins high over his head.

"P'rhaps not. This hyer lady hed better be a-movin' long in ther same d'reckshun ef she wants ter go at all, an' then we'll consider."

The woman wanted no urging. From the moment of the appearance of the road-agent she seemed to shun observation as much as possible, and if she had not started with her companion in the abduction it was because she was afraid she might not be included in the arrangement. She went away without a single backward glance.

"An' now, leetle woman, they done the'r work up a heap-sight better than they figgered on. You war lookin' fur Adam Druyer. I'm ther chap; what's wanted?"

"Is there a threat behind that, if I do not go on and reveal my business? You can scarcely expect me to believe that you are the man for whom I am searching."

"Jest ez yer hez it. But ef thar's ary other man sez he's ther Adam Druyer thet prospected 'round hyer with one Harold Stone, in times ez are gone by, thet same are a liar an' a hoss-thief. I'm guessin' thet you be ther da'rter ov my ole side-pard, an' I'm a givin' yer a straight tip on ther dead level. Ef I've mistook, all I got ter do are ter swear yer in an' let yer go. Fur ary other body I ain't got a word ter say regardin' them things."

"I am the daughter of the Harold Stone you mention, but I cannot yet believe you are the man I wanted to find."

"Play you do, though, an' open out. Yer cain't do yerself ary damidge, an' ef it's ther truth I'm tellin' yer it may be a heap good thing ter do."

"But Adam Druyer was—was—"

Prudence forbade her to finish the sentence as she had intended when she began it. If this was the Druyer she wanted he might well take exception to what she had begun to say.

Captain Brand, however, finished the sentence for her, and he did it with a harsh laugh.

"Was an honest man, you war goin' ter say."

"An' he talked like a book. That war ther old Adam, sure enuf, an' yit I'm ther same pusson. Don't ax questions why it are so, but just knuckle down ter biz. I ain't much time ter waste, an' ef yer don't git w'ot yer want now thar's no tellin' ef yer ever gits it. The life we live are mighty onsartin'."

"If you are the Adam Druyer I sought to meet then you are in disguise, and afraid to trust yourself with me under your own colors. Why should I show more confidence?"

"Bless yer soul, honey, what's that to do with your affairs? Nex' time yer sees me I'll be sum'un else. It's a part ov ther trade. I ain't like ter do yer ary harm, an' I may do yer good. Ef yer won't run yer chainces better wagon back ter town an' call ther deal off."

"There is truth in what you say, and because it can make matters no worse I will take you at your word and believe you are the old-time pard of my father. It does not seem it should be hard for you to guess what I would ask."

"Can there be a chance that Harold Stone still lives? If not, how did he die, and where was he buried? There is more than revenge or sentiment in these questions, though there is enough of both."

"Now ye'r a-gittin' ter bedrock. An' it's jest ez well you don't ax them things too free 'round Sinners' Flat. Yer may hev another visit frum Steve Bradley. I ain't shore thet Stone are dead, but it looks mighty likely; an' ef he's gone up ther flume it stan's ter reason thet ther man what holds ther Fair Dove Mine started him on his journey. Mebbe you have heered ov Morris Howe?"

"I have heard the name, and that he owns property that was my father's by right of discovery and work; but I have heard little more. Teli me something of him, and why you fancy he is guilty of such a thing as a murder."

"You kep' me so long a-chinnin' thet I 'ain't ez much time ez I'd like fer explainin', an' I'll hev ter make it short an' solid."

He stopped for a moment as though he was seeking to arrange what he had to say. Then, in a low tone, he went on:

"When a man hez a good thing ov it an' steps out suddint an' onbeknowns, an' another man drops inter his shoes 'thout hevin' ter say whar or how, out hyer we s'pect ef we do keep dark. Ef I hed bin hyer you bet thar would 'a' bin questions axed; but by ther time I got back it war late in the day, an' I war kinder oncertain ef I'd git justiss in a court. I bin a-lookin' 'round a leetle on me own hook, an' mebbe I struck s'uthin' ez hez a bearin'. You seen me git it frum Meg Brandon. It looks all straight an' ship-shape, an' shows thet ther mortgidge ez Howe held on ther find war all paid off, slick an' clean."

As he spoke he brought out the very paper he had succeeded in forcing from the proprietress of the Gates of Glory when the stage was held up.

"Ez she said, I cain't do much with this;

but I reckon it would be apt ter set you solid on ther ground floor, an' thinkin' it over I've concluded ter pass it your way. Road-agent er not, I'm not a-goin' back on ther darter ov ther old pard w'ot allers used me white."

"There is money, then?" asked Stella, with a gasp.

"It was not that I was after, but to find my father."

"This hyer will be the next best thing. You jest git it recorded, all in ship-shape, an' until it are done keep outen ther fingers ov Howe an' his heelers. You kin see they are arter you already, an' sooner than miss they'd send you arter yer father."

"But how did you know?"

"I got outen ther deal ez Meg war makin' with a tough case ez wunst hung 'round hyer. How, are a story ov another kind."

"But what did she intend to do with it? Certainly it could not be of any value to her—and she seemed so loth to give it up."

"Mebbe she meant ter play ther same game I hed laid out—ter pinch Morris till he made a divvy. It ain't perzactly her style, but thar's no knowin' jest how an' whar a wooman like her will break out."

"And you think the man with whom you found me to-night was a tool of this man Howe?"

"Shore ov it. An' fur ther sake ov yer health steer clear ov him in ther future. They're skeered ov ye, an' when that crowd are skeered they don't keer whar they hit. Now, ef ye hev ary questions spit 'em out fur I must be a-goin'. You cain't miss ther way back ter ther Flat, an' I'll hev one ov my men watch yer till yer gits to ther town fur fear that galoot chips ag'in. Ef I kin help yer furdur I'll do it fur ther sake ov my pard ez war white; but like ez not I cain't. I most ginerally hev my han's full ter look out fur number one."

There was some little conversation, which was only explanatory of what has already been mentioned.

Then Stella set out on her return to the Flat.

To give her further confidence Captain Brand had put into her hands a revolver, and as she knew how to use it she believed that, backed up by the road-agent in the distance, she had nothing to fear from Steve Bradley and the hag who was so ready to do his bidding.

Though the region was solitary there was no doubt in finding her way along the thread of a trail by which she had come, and before long she caught a glimpse of the lights of Sinners' Flat, twinkling in the distance.

It seemed it would be the wisest course to turn loose the horse she had accumulated before entering the town, and she was about to dismount for the purpose when, from the bushes by the roadside, a weird figure darted, and sprang astride the animal from behind.

One long, bony hand twined around her throat, while another clutched the reins from her hand and wheeled the horse. Then, with a screech that made the blood of the girl run cold, her captor struck his heels sharply into the ribs of the frightened animal, causing him to dash away in headlong flight.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VALUE OF THREE SIXES.

SOMETIMES fortunes are lost and won with frightful rapidity at the card-table, and again, luck and skill are so evenly balanced it takes a long while for one man to get the better of his fellows.

It did not take the Tie-To Sport many minutes to find out that the two knew the value of a hand as well as the next, and with luck so evenly balanced he was cautious about forcing the pace.

He had a fair working capital for an ordinary game, but not enough to stand many heavy losses.

Charley Briggs was one of those men who seem overflowing with good-nature while they play. To hear him talk one would not suppose he had more than half a thought for the game, and was careless whether he was to win or lose.

While he shuffled the cards he kept up a running fire of questions, and if no answer was otherwise forthcoming he answered himself.

"First appearance at the Flat, I believe?"

He slung the question at Hammond in a friendly way, and the sport answered it after the terse fashion of one who was busy, and didn't relish any outside nonsense.

"Oh, of course, I knew it without asking, but I couldn't help putting a word or two in so I could add a dozen later on. I'm a stranger myself, or pretty near it, though I have been around the camp enough to have caught on to some of the ropes. Mighty bad place it is for a man with a kink in his neck. They are so rough when they try to help him straighten it out. Three cards you want, and I'll take two. What are you doing, Mr. Johnson?"

For half an hour the game went on with even fortune.

Then, as he looked over his hand, Johnson braced himself up, or seemed to, and began to crowd the betting.

"Easy, easy, my friend," laughed Briggs, counting down the coin called for to see Johnson's raise. "You hadn't ought to have bluffed out the stranger unless you were sure I'd follow him."

"But you don't bluff me worth a cent. I'll stay right by you through six troubles, and on the seventh you'll find me around. There you are, and there's a few ducats that says you're clean wrong. When you tickle me, old man, you always find me ready to reciprocate."

It was hard to tell from his face whether Johnson was disgusted at catching the wrong fish. At any rate he saw the raise and went a few dollars better.

"Oh, I'm after you with a sharp stick," continued Briggs, as he again went over the other.

"I'm only sorry our friend here couldn't see his way to staying in. I do like to win a pile when the cards run right."

"In your mind," growled Johnson, taking a glance at his hand and then making another raise.

"Most parties I have played draw with let their money do the talking. It's a heap better than to be chawing so much wind. If you are going to stay with me, better show up just how long. It'll save both of us a lot of time counting over change, and clear the road for a tussle between me and the stranger, here. He don't say so much, but that don't hinder his knowing the cards by name."

"One down and another come on, eh? If I knew how much gelt you carried I'd better know the size of the pile I ought to put on the table. How does that strike you for a raise?"

Still laughing, Briggs first counted out the amount it took for him to come in.

Then, he drew a roll of money carelessly from the side-pocket of his coat, and began turning over the ends of the bills.

When he had fingered over ten of them, each with a C on the end, he flung the little package down with a flourish, and looked up knowingly in the face of the other, whose answer was not long coming.

"Pretty fair for a tin-horn speller, just in from a raid on the joskins at a country fair, but not much for a highflyer at the Gates of Glory. A little better if you please."

And this time he fluttered two thousand down, and evidently had more back of it.

"Ah," said Briggs, with what might have

passed for a sigh of relief, tossing his roll into the pot.

"A high roller from 'way back. Cover what you can, and if you size the pile I'll open another wad. If it's for blood and hair we'll have plenty in sight."

"Count out your coin, and call the size of it. I don't want to finger your wealth till the cards say it's mine," grumbled Johnson, evidently a little staggered by the size of the stake, but not inclined to take water.

"Eight thousand you will find it, bar mistakes at the bank in counting it. Money talks now. Put up or shut up."

The sport was watching the game with all eyes in spite of the careless front he maintained.

He began to think he was sailing in deep water. If this was the size of a little side game for amusement, what would he have got into if he had looked around for the heavy holders? Was Johnson going to stay with his antagonist?

No real question did there seem to be about that.

"Eight thousand I see, and we'll let it stop right there. I'd know what you had if it cost me a fortune, and if I had a million I'd stake it on a side bet that I scoop the pot."

From his own boodle he drew away a few bills, and placed the remainder against the pile just pushed up by Charley Briggs.

The latter threw down his hand, face up—permost, but bunched together.

The top card was the ace of hearts.

"Four of a kind, and they're all like the little joker on top."

"Not good," gritted Johnson, throwing down his hand so the five cards could be seen.

It was a straight flush of hearts, beginning at the deuce, and running upward.

Then, he thrust his hand over toward the pot.

"You say? What's the matter with mine?" asked Briggs, spreading out his cards with one hand while with the other he made a gesture that protected the money on the table.

"I said I had four of a kind, but that don't hinder from having five. The cards speak for themselves."

He also had a flush in hearts, but it was also the highest hand in the deck—a flush royal.

"And you dealt the cards?" said Johnson, in a low, tense tone.

"I dealt the cards," answered Briggs.

"What's the matter with that?"

And then, like a flash the two men were up and facing, each with a revolver in his hand. Johnson had attempted to catch the drop before he said the word, "cheat," but Briggs was with him, as he had been all along.

"Hold the stakes, pardner, till this thing is settled, and see the best man gets them," hastily exclaimed Briggs.

It may have been said to divert the attention of the other man, but if so the trap was not a success.

Though Dell Hammond coolly bent forward, and swept up the stakes without the least apparent thought of danger, the eyes of Johnson never left his antagonist.

"I'll settle with him afterward," he gritted. "First is this matter with you. Shall it be a go as you please, or do you want a regular thing of it?"

"I guess I can hold over you with the barkers as well as with the pictures, and at any game or any gait you choose to take 'em. It is a pity to make a muss here. We'll go out doors, where Meg can't hinder. Have you got any friend, or shall I lend you one of mine?"

Charley Briggs thrust away his pistol as he spoke, and turned away.

With lightning like speed Johnson threw up his own, and there was a double report.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RISING OF JUDGE LYNCH.

CHARLEY BRIGGS'S knees shut up jack-knife fashion, or he would have been a dead gambler.

It was the jarring click of the hammer of the revolver held in Johnson's hand which saved him. He knew that after hearing that the bullet would be along in short order, and he dodged in the speediest and most effective way.

As he seated himself on the floor, with more promptness than grace, his revolver came out again, and he twisted himself around, just in time to see Johnson falling toward him. At the same time, Dell Hammond was thrusting away a pistol.

"Thankee, pard!" cried Briggs, leaping to his feet, his weapon still in hand.

"I might have known the dirty dog would play me foul if he could, and if you hadn't chipped I reckon I would have stood a mighty good show to go over the range. He would have got a second shot before I could be ready for him."

Hammond made no answer but looked keenly around, his hand resting carelessly near to his now hidden pistol. He was not sure the frolic was over yet.

At the reports all was confusion in that part of the saloon.

The two players, who had thus by chance, as it seemed, become pards, had not suffered it to pass altogether unnoticed that there were more spectators to the game than was usual, and that for some time there had been an unexplained drift in the direction of the table.

Now, these outsiders all suddenly developed into friends of the man who lay where he had fallen, his arms outstretched, and his face covered with blood from a wound in his head.

Fortunately for the two the crowd was all around them. Had it not been for that the ball might have opened on the instant, for more than one hand brandished a weapon, and from the shouts which arose as it came surging forward it seemed the crowd was already ripe for revenge.

"Down with him! He's shot Dave in cold blood—whar's yer rope?"

"It's ther bloody pirate ez came in on ther stage, an' they did say he war Captain Brand, hisself."

"Hang ther road-agent, an' send his pard up along with him!"

"Hands up thar, yerselves, an' see how yer likes it!"

"Up they are," retorted Briggs; "but each one holds about half a dozen lives. Go a leetle slow till you find what all this racket is about. He tried to shoot me from behind, and if my pard, there, gave him his gruel it was no more than he deserved. There's the mark of Johnson's bullet on the wall, and if it wasn't a fair line shot for the head that just then didn't happen to be there I'd like to know. Steady as you are or there will be pistol play for a fact."

The rush wavered and came to a halt. Briggs was covering several of those who had wasted time flourishing pistols, and Dell Hammond was taking care of the rest. He found he had been elected to the position of Briggs's pard whether he wanted it or not, and under the circumstances it might not be exactly safe to decline the honor. Charley was in effect putting in one word for himself, and a dozen for him.

But the danger was not over.

There was a chance for a sly shot at any moment, and meantime, if the crowd was checked its humor seemed only to become more deadly.

In spite of the pistols one man took a step to the front.

"Thar's a dead man on the floor, an' thar's the man what shot him without a word ov warning. Sinners' Flat may be a rough

place, but it's whar they deal out jestice, hot an' quick. Are these men ter git it?"

"You bet!" chorused the crowd.

"Thar you have it," he continued, turning to Briggs.

"When ther boys talk that way they mean business. You can't fight ther town, an' then thar'll be no chance at all ef yer tries it on. Step up ter Jedge Lynch's bar an' you'll git what yer deserves; no more, an' no less. What do yer say? An' be mighty keerful how yer answers."

"You say, pard," said Briggs, giving a quick, keen glance at Dell Hammond.

"I pass. You know the gang better than I. If I was running things I'd say I never was called down as long as I held sixes, and was ready to bet money they would rake the pot."

"Then, that's my platform, too. If you galoots want two prisoners you got to come and take them."

And side by side, with their backs against the wall, the two men faced the crowd, which again appeared to be at about boiling heat.

"Last offer. It's your pard that done ther shootin', an' it's him that we'll be a-tryin'. We know he shot Dave; we reckon he's snatched ther stakes, w'ot made Dave git to his gun, an' we s'pect him ov bein' a road-agent, which ther same he kin explain how he come ter git on ther hearse jest ez Captain Brand war a-leavin' after a hold-up this afternoon. Ef yer wants ter do him good git him ter hold up his hands an' you kin be rustlin' 'round ter see that we play him fair. Dunno ez we got ary thing ag'in' you 'cept bein' in blame bad company."

Part of this was not just as clear as mud, but it was plain it was a bid made to separate the two pards.

Charley Briggs simply shrugged his shoulders.

Then, he edged a little closer to the Tie-To Sport, and in a low tone gave a warning:

"It's the worst gang, and the biggest gang in town. Reckon there will be music in the air. All the same when the pinch does come I can count on a few friends if I give the signal. But I'd like blame well to know how they found me out."

"You don't want ter waste no time askin' conunderums," piped a shrill voice, almost at his elbow.

"They're a-goin' ter plug one ov yer frum the winder, with a shot-gun, an' I'm bettin' odds thet ef they begin they'll take yer in, all both. What yer goin' ter do about it, afore I j'ines ther other side?"

Billy Jingle had crept in through the push, some time before, and after the fashion of the Irish rioter was willing to throw a brick wherever he could see a head.

"By heavens! you're right, boy!" exclaimed Briggs, his gaze darting toward the window immediately opposite.

"I wondered why they held up. Steady, there, and ready here. Ah!"

Through the window came a pair of muzzles that evidently belonged to shot-guns, and for an instant faces were seen, glancing along the barrels.

There was no time for hesitation or challenge.

When men took such careful aim it was because they meant death to follow. The two pards were close to the gates of death, and only the warning of the boy to save them.

With a quick turn of the wrists the sport threw his muzzles around, and without dwelling on his aim fired two shots.

A scream came from without, and the clatter of a steel barrel falling upon a stone.

The other barrel wavered for a second, pointed upward, sent a handful of buck-shot into the ceiling, and then disappeared. Neither of the sport's shots were wasted.

Quickly as he turned again to the crowd, the men of Sinners' Flat were quicker. His

fire had been drawn, and before he could even draw the hammers of his tools a dozen men were upon him, snarling, swearing, grasping, ready to tear or slay.

At the same time, some one flung a hat into the face of Charley Briggs and though he aimlessly pulled trigger once, the end of his gun was forced upward, and he was flung into the midst of the snarling, gnashing crowd.

Dell Hammond in the course of his business experiences had been in such *emeutes* before, though they were not directed at his life, but at that of some other unfortunate.

He had not, from the first, been able to make up his mind that all this riot was on account of the shooting of Dave Johnson; but if it was he had lost all chance of clearing his skirts when he fired two shots at the men in the window. All that seemed left, now, was a fight to the bitter end.

Clasping his pistol tightly he struck out savagely with their steel bound butts, he wrenched himself loose from the hands that grasped him, he did the work of a dozen men. Had Briggs been as vicious the two would have cut a wide swath through the crowd—might even have come out victorious.

Unfortunately, Briggs was on the defensive.

Once moving and they kept him moving. He was hustled this way, and when he broke away he was plunged that. He fired several shots without knowing whether they counted, and then saw two men driving at him with knives in their fists.

At sight of that he appeared to lose his sand. He gave utterance to a loud whistle, tore himself loose once more, and having broken through in some miraculous manner went sailing feet through the nearest window, just as Early Ike, Ante Ben, and other heelers of the place came driving through the door which led to the bar-room.

All this passed with almost blinding rapidity, but Dell Hammond kept the run of the cards as the game progressed, and when he saw Briggs retreat he thought it was time to go along. He leaped back in time to evade a knife-thrust, sprung upward, landing upon the shoulders of two of the mob, and over the heads of them all bounded for the window, firing shots from either hand as he went.

As he passed through the opening left by Charley Briggs some one was right at his heels, and that some one was Billy Jingle.

CHAPTER X.

THE TIE-TO SPORT RETIRES IN GOOD ORDER.

So far to the best of his knowledge, Dell Hammond had killed no one.

There was a chance his bullets had not gone exactly where he meant them, but he was willing to bet such was not the case. It was to avoid going to extremities, and to gain a little time, that he retreated. Had he believed the case was hopeless he would have died trying to make his teeth meet.

He did not blame Briggs for making his retreat, though he was a little surprised at not finding him waiting outside.

At any rate, he did not intend to remain there to make a fight alone, and with head bent low tripped along close to the side of the house. The shadow concealed him, and he naturally made for the rear of the saloon as being the best route to take to dodge the would be lynchers.

Something he did not altogether understand caused him to hasten on.

He was certain Briggs was not lurking near, yet before he had taken the second step some one on the outside began a regular fusillade—and it was directed at the house, for with every shot Dell could hear the jingle of breaking window-glass.

"He's throwing away good lead, firing high," thought Hammond, as he hurried along.

"Sorry I haven't time to stop and tell him so, but I reckon he'll catch on to it shortly after the crowd does."

Voices near to him caused his reflections to take another turn.

The rear of the house was evidently guarded.

A man or men had been stationed there, and a man or men had just come hurrying to the spot.

"You bet it's a racket," one of them was saying.

"We got Captain Brand, the road-agent, cooped in there, and the boys are just getting away with him. If he comes out of this door, plug him!"

"Sounds as though he might be gettin' away with ther boys," suggested one of the party.

"You can't scoop up that sort without more than fun."

"Right you are. He and his pard salted down Dave Johnson, and have salivated two or three more. They passed the word along, but I tell you they are bound to have him."

It seemed possible no one thought or knew of the fact that the men detailed to guard the windows had both been downed, and that avenue of escape was open. Hammond fancied it would be best to leave the region before they did, though how to go without attracting attention was not so easy to determine.

The Gates of Glory was a nucleus toward which men were running from all directions.

While he hesitated, looking this way and that, Billy Jingle's paw was hooked under his arm.

"This way, pard. It looks dusty, but the road are level. I give 'em somethin' ter think about, an' I shouldn't wonder ef I put the brand on two or three. Better come erlong with yer grandpap an' hunt a hole."

"I'm huntin' a hole, right enough, but I'm not so sure I'll find it in time. Stop your chinning and go to hunting if you mean sport. If not, clear out!"

"This way, then. I jest wanted ter know ef I war ter count yer in."

He stood and stole off at right angles, followed by the sport.

Billy knew what he was aiming for. In the rear of a shanty not more than a dozen paces away there was an old ditch which offered the best kind of an avenue for retreat.

Along this they stumbled for some distance, while the noises in their rear showed they were being sought after principally in the opposite direction.

"Guess Briggsy are drawin' them that way, an' I must say, I ain't a-keerin'. Ef they ketch him they'll hang him, but that's twist ez good ez though they hung me. I'm leavin' town, how are it with you, pard?"

"Oh, I guess I will hardly go yet. I can slip around to my room and wait till the tide goes down."

"No, you can't mister, fur hyer they come now. Legs, do yer duty!"

The heavy tramp of half a dozen men running at rapid rate came quite plainly to their ears. If they had thought of the ditch and were now following its course it would not be long before they would give the signal which would draw the rest of the gang thither.

Billy waited for no answer, but shot away as fast as his little legs could carry him, never once looking over his shoulder.

Dell Hammond would have followed, but at that instant an unlucky misstep caused him to stumble, and seeing he could scarcely save himself from falling he allowed himself to drop to the ground.

Then, he rolled over and over a few times, and remained quiet.

The fact was, he knew that if he rose from the ground he would be seen, and he did not think he was bound to show himself

simply because the plunging steps of the boy in advance could still be distinctly heard.

The crowd rushed past, in the wake of the boy, and then he rose and followed. It struck him it would not be the fair thing to desert the lad, for the tender mercies of such men as those were cruel, and if they thought Billy had designedly led them off the trail—even if they had no other account against him—they might do murder.

In this way the chase kept up until they were well out of the camp. Perhaps Billy Jingle played the same game the sport tried. At any rate, he appeared to suddenly vanish without track or sound, and hearing him no longer the men from Sinners' Flat came to a halt, fairly puzzled at the disappearance.

"Bet yer a dollar he's dodged around an' got back ter ther town, ef that war him," said one voice; and then others chimed in, giving different views of the situation.

Back in the town lights were glancing, and there were the shouts of men who were running to and fro. The Sinners were in dead earnest, and appeared to have turned out *en masse* for a grand batteau.

After some consultation in a low tone the party divided up.

Two remained standing with drawn pistols, watching and listening, two went back toward the camp, while the rest stole carefully along in the direction the fugitive seemed to be going the last they heard of him.

It was plain they were not altogether certain they had been on the right track. Had they been so they would have given a general alarm.

With such evidences of determination Hammond saw that he could not regain the town without a fight. He was an exile, and all that was left for him to do was to get as far away from the place as quickly as possible.

So far as knowledge of location went he was altogether lost.

He knew nothing about the approaches to the Flat save the trail by which he had entered it, and he had not taken particular notice of that, nor did he have the least idea of whereabouts it lay. The best he could do was to seek a hiding place and wait for daylight to decide upon the final line of retreat.

It was ticklish work edging away from the spot where he had been lying, but the attempt had to be made, and very cautiously did he move away, flanking the two sentinels, and avoiding the route taken by the rest. He might run upon some of the latter at any moment.

He went slowly, but he went surely.

No attention was attracted in his direction, and in ten minutes or so it seemed he was fairly out of the dangerous neighborhood, and could draw a long breath.

As he gave a sigh of relief he heard a low laugh almost at his elbow and Billy Jingle was around as usual.

"Mighty close cutting, but I got a fair pattern outen the piece ov cloth. One time I tho't I'd have ter draw my poppers, and slap ther brand on, but I reckon they kin run wild fur mavericks a bit longer."

"A young man about your size will get more than branded, with your fool capers, some of these times. I'd like to know who is running this thing, you or I. And I'll swear, I don't see what call you have to chip anyhow. A sweet youth of your age and appearance ought to be at home and in bed."

The sport could hardly be angry with the boy, though it appeared to him he was getting to be something of a nuisance.

"In bed, yer grandfather! Whar would you come out at ef Billy Jingle an' his brand-in' irons wa'n't around. Foller me, an' ef I don't lead ter glory I'll show yer a road outen ther wood. After that, ef yer want

ter go it alone say ther word an' I'll drop yer an' go hunt fur that man Briggs."

"Don't you think you had better go now? Your infernal chinning will bring all the Flat this way; and no doubt Briggs needs you more than I do."

"Dunno. He's a young man ov sand, though, unfortunately, it runs out by ther time ther pinch comes. Ef it's his time on he's a roarin' lion ov ther archipelergoes, an' ef it ain't he's a spring lam', with green peas an' sparrowgrass. I don't take much stock in him, an' I kinder think he's a-runnin' yit."

"No doubt, if he thinks you are coming on his trail. For a small boy with great gall you take the cake. I think I'll run myself."

The conversation had been carried on in a careful tone. Without waiting for answer Dell started off at a rapid rate.

Billy did not attempt to follow. He folded his arms and looked after the vanishing shadow.

"Never mind, young man," he muttered. "You'll come my way before ther night are over, an' ef Sinners' Flat comes with yer I'll most likely hev a chainece ter slap on me brand."

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOY, AND THE MEN.

WHEN Charley Briggs went out of the window he had no idea of further flight than the rear of the house.

He gave one glance over his shoulder to see that the Tie-to Sport was following in his wake, and then pushed on to clear the way.

The men on guard were a revelation, and he began to see it was a more serious situation, even, than he had thought.

For an instant he stood irresolute, looking backward, and saw Hammond come sailing through the window.

Then, at the noise of running footsteps he broke away in a flight so silent that Dell failed to catch a sight of his flitting figure.

After he had once begun to move, circumstances kept him moving on. He was not far ahead of Billy Jingle when that interesting youth was trying to throw the pursuers off the track, and he kept up his rapid pace for half a mile or more without pausing to look back.

Then, he broke into a laugh and threw himself down by the side of the trail.

"Well, for a sport of my experience I do take the most foolish panics now and then that man ever dreamed of. If it was not so ridiculous it would be infernal, and I don't know that I would care to meet Daisy Dell in the morning."

He started and looked up, even while he was thinking this. He heard light footsteps near him, and the clatter of a horse's feet further off.

If some one was getting into position to command the road, Charley Briggs was determined to hold his advantage, and he bent forward, though beginning to be uncertain whether the lurker was man or beast.

What he saw was the capture of Stella as detailed in a preceding chapter.

From the time she came into view—and in the dim light she was none too clearly to be seen—until her captor was dashing away, was so brief a space it was a wonder Briggs recognized her at all.

He did, though, and flung up his hand, training his gun to bear on the back of the weird horseman as he turned away.

More than one reason held his finger from tightning on the trigger.

A bullet which struck the one might well pierce both; and, hit or miss, the report would be sufficient to guide all Sinners' Flat to the spot.

"Great heavens! It is the girl who came in on the stage, and—and—that face! Strange

I never noticed it except as belonging to a bread-and-butter miss. Could it—*can* it be?"

It was hardly possible flight could be kept up long at the gait at which the horseman started, and pursuit on foot was not altogether as wild a thing as it might have seemed to one unacquainted with the lay of the land.

Up to his feet sprung Briggs, thrusting away his weapon, so as to be untrammelled in his movements, and with his elbows at his sides, after the fashion of a practiced runner, he struck in on the trail, following the footsteps, the sounds of which were rapidly growing fainter.

He trailed along for some distance, and the sound of a pistol-shot urged him to greater exertions.

"Curses on it," he panted, as the sounds of the steps finally failed altogether.

"The man was Morris Howe. Ghoul that he is, if he knows who he has in hand—and why else should he have taken her—her life is not worth a dime. He will kill her if no worse. I'll trail him to the Fair Dove Mine, and shoot him in his own shanty if I can do no better. Perhaps it will not be too late to save her."

He recognized the route as one by which the mine could be reached, and meant every word that was said.

Only, for the time being the men of the Flat had been forgotten.

Now that there was a fair distance between them they could have been circumvented easily enough, but they had ceased to enter into his calculations from the moment sight had been had of the fair, frightened face of the girl captive.

But Sinners' Flat was around—or, at least, that section of it represented by a determined gang of would-be lynchers—and it was fated Charley Briggs should drop into their hands after a fashion which rendered resistance impossible.

He came along carelessly enough, and several men, darting out from behind, threw themselves upon him and bore him to the ground.

Before there was more than time for a muttered curse to leave his lips, a cord had been twisted around his wrists, and his captors were bending over to take a closer look at their find.

"It's not the galoot ez downed pore Dave, but he'll do jest ez well," growled one who, with knee on his chest held a lighted match to his face.

"Ef he didn't kill Dave he warnted to, jest ther same, an' we'll swing him off ter keep our han's in tell we kin find his pard."

"Reckon we ort ter give him some sort ov a show fur his white alley," answered another.

"Guess we best take him back ter town an' have him turned off regular like. P'raps we kin turn 'em both off ter wunst."

"An' give him a chance ter git away an' slaughter a few more good men like Dave. I vote ter turn him off right hyer, an' now, an' then keep mum about it. Ef we hed got his pard we'd 'a' put 'em all both up hyer an' now, so what's ther dif?"

Charley Briggs was as silent as a wolf in a trap.

There was no chance for resistance, and he knew that with these men talk would not count. There was something more behind all this than the shooting of Dave Johnson, or he was very much mistaken.

Would he keep up that sort of nerve to the end?

Though there was still some objection to his sudden taking off, the sport knew it was only a question of time when it would be overruled, and the rope would be noosed that was to end the struggle.

There was just one point in the sport's favor, and that was, the scarcity of rope.

For a little it really seemed as though the execution would have to be deferred.

Two or three belts and suspenders finally solved that difficulty, and with savage earnestness the tragic farce went on. The rope was short but it was stout, and the noose that was made slipped as freely as though it had been of the best hemp. It could be utilized, and they intended to do it, doubly brutal as their method might be.

The end was made fast to a limb up to which one of the men had climbed; and he kept his perch, holding the noose open, to receive the neck of Charley Briggs, whom the rest were raising up. They meant strangulation, pure and simple.

At the last moment the gambler found his tongue.

"One moment, men! For heaven's sake listen!"

His voice sounded no more like the careless, cheeky Charley Briggs. The change was so great, one of the lynchers dropped his hold and staggered back.

"Curse you fur a coward!" shouted the leader—he who had insisted on an immediate execution.

As he spoke his hands sought Briggs's throat, cutting off further speech.

"Up with him, an' ef Tom don't like it we kin put him alongside ter keep him company. All tergether, now!"

"Skassly!" chirped a shrill voice.

"I reckon it'll be one at a time onless yer han's all goes up tergether. On'y time ov askin'. Drap that an' git, afore I put the brand on."

Billy Jingle did not intend the force of his words should be lost by waiting long for an answer.

About the time they had fairly left his mouth he began to shoot; and his first shot went plowing along the shoulder of the man up the tree, just fairly breaking the skin.

With a howl of dismay he plunged head-forward toward the ground.

Underneath him was the group supporting Charley Briggs, and as he descended spread-eagle fashion he was able to take them all in, just as another shot from Billy's revolver hurtled over their heads.

The men stumbled this way and that, and each one was more than half-sure the bullet had struck him. Charley Briggs was allowed to drop unheeded while they took to their heels instant. It was a rout as sudden as it was, to all parties concerned, unexpected.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Billy, darting toward the prostrate gambler.

"They are awful sinners, but they ain't got sand fur a cent."

His keen knife quickly divided the cords at the wrists of the late captive, and Charley's hands at once went for the revolvers which no one had thought worth while to remove.

"Sinners they are, but when they hunt together they have the courage of a pack of wolves. They may be back on us any minute. Come, before they get here. There's one or two in that crowd who can shoot very straight."

"That's right. Glad ter see yer gittin' a move on ov some kind. Whar ye think ov goin' to?"

"Straight to the Fair Dove Mine. There's business there for me to do, and if I had the time, and dared to go back to the Flat, I'd never go alone."

"Ner ye won't either, pard. I reckon I've biz thar meself, an' ef I don't hev ter put ther brand on it 'll perobably be acause I've grow'd colder than this hyer iron. This are ther way I heat her up."

He threw out the empty shells as he spoke, and thrust in fresh cartridges. His branding-iron was ready, and unlike Dell Hammond, Briggs did not disdain the aid of the boy, for together the two left the spot.

CHAPTER XII.

MORRIS HOWE'S MERCY.

THE clutch on Stella Stone's throat was more for warning than harm. It gave her a taste of what she might expect if she did not yield promptly.

When it loosened a little, the voice of the man hissed into her ear:

"This time I take it in hand myself, and there will be no getting away. Submit quietly and you have a chance for your life. Make any resistance or outcry and I will wring your neck like I would that of a spring chicken. You ought to know if I have the strength."

She certainly did know.

The gripe on her neck had not been there for long, but it had left a mark that would stay for some time, and she was even now in the dazed condition of one who has been thoroughly well choked.

It was useless to ask the cause of this treatment. Her heart misgave her. Steve Bradley had failed him, and Morris Howe was taking up the business himself. After the warning of the road-agent she knew she would have to expect the worst if she fell into his hands.

The flight went on without more words. Before very long they flitted past a small party of men, one whom tried to stop them, and fired a pistol-shot which hummed perilously near to the head of the man behind her, but Stella was not sure whether she wanted their aid. Men wandering on the mountain-side at his time of night were not the safest of all ties for young ladies such as she.

There was one thing which offered her some consolation when she was cool enough to think about it.

If she managed to get safely out of the clutches of the man, she ought to take with her considerable information about his intentions, which she could have gathered in no other way.

Perhaps this abduction would turn out to have been for the best, after all.

And if she did not get away?

Well, Stella Stone was no coward. She recognized that there was a chance against her as well as in her favor, but as she had not invited the risk, so she would not shrink from it. If the worst came to the worst she would probably find out the fate of her father before she went.

Meantime, where was he taking her?

She had not yet learned much in regard to the environments of the Flat, and all she knew was that he had turned aside from the trail she had previously followed, and thus had avoided the spot where the man who had called himself Adam Druyer had come to her rescue a little while before.

Perhaps Captain Brand, or some of his satellites, would turn up again. In that case the end would not be quite so bloodless as when she was taken out of Steve Bradley's hands.

The man offered no further explanations. Stella could see that he was all the time on the alert, and was sure any attempt to escape would find him ready to thwart it. After what seemed to her a very long and wearisome ride he came to a place where there were signs of settlement and work.

A rude cabin lay against the side of the mountain, and near to it were several openings in the ground.

"It is a mine," she thought.

"What if it is the Fair Dove, and I should find poor father's bones? I wonder if I would recognize them. I wonder more if I could bring this man's crime home to him?"

The man came to a halt, and cautiously dismounted.

He evidently did not intend to give her the least chance of escape, since, when he slid from the horse, he drew her with him so that she fairly tumbled into his arms.

He stood for a moment as though considering a matter of some importance. The door of the cabin was right at his hand, and a short distance away a windlass overhung one of the openings. He seemed to be debating whether to use shaft or cabin.

"The mine would be the surer but there are the risks of taking her down alone. A drop there would make an end of the whole business, fast enough, and I'm not ready for that—yet. There was only one fool in that outfit, and surely the boys have sense enough to know how to make him hold his peace. The cabin it will be. Come!"

He spoke the concluding word harshly—the rest of it had hardly been above a whisper—and began dragging her toward the door.

"Be a little easy, sir. I have no idea of resisting until you drive me to it. When you go that far—well, you may find that I can use my hands."

"Humph! You have found your voice at last. Good. I was afraid you might choose to play deaf and dumb. We'll have a little more talk later on. See that you do not make a fool of yourself. Mistakes here seldom go over."

He did not abate his vigilance, but he removed his hand from her arm while he unlocked the heavy door.

Then, he bade her enter, and following once more locked the door behind them.

The air did not feel close, for there was an opening in the gable end which allowed the wind to blow through, but it was dark as could be, and if Stella had not been the girl of courage that she was her heart might have failed her.

Perhaps the revolver given her by Brand accounts somewhat for her courage. At last she was able to place her hand upon it, and the touch was, to say the least, reassuring.

The darkness did not last long for there was the striking of a match, and then a fire flared up in the large fire-place which occupied almost the whole of one end of the room.

The kindling seemed to have been all ready for the match, and by the sudden blaze Stella took a view of her surroundings.

The room was rudely furnished, and looked as though it was the headquarters of a bachelor miner or hunter. There was a round table, a couple chairs and a few table and cooking utensils. In addition, there was a bunk in one corner. With a shutter fastened over the hole above, and the door locked, the room might make a sufficiently gloomy prison, and she wondered whether the man expected to keep her there any length of time. It was an out-of-the-way place, but still, there seemed to be a chance of some straggler coming that way at almost any hour of the day.

From the room she turned to the man himself, and gave him a fearless, searching look.

The sight was not reassuring.

The face of the man was dark with passion, and with the possibilities of sin, and he was eying her as an eagle might a lamb which it had marked for its prey.

His long fingers were bent talon-like, and she would not have been surprised if he had swooped down upon her, then and there.

"Are you a woman of sense?" he asked at length, when he found her eyes did not droop under the burning gaze of his own.

"Perhaps. Who can tell?" was her answer, given in a steady tone.

"Do you care to live?"

"Not very much."

"Has the prospect of gold without end no charms for you?"

"It might have had once; it has few now."

"Take heed what you are saying. I'll take your words as the truth, and it is life or death you are deciding on now."

"However that may be I enter into no

bargain with you, Morris Howe, until I know more of the past than you would care to tell me. If you slew my father you will probably kill me; but if it is fated so to be, what matter? I would be willing to wager my salvation you will not live long afterward, to enjoy the Fair Dove Mine.

"Ah!" gritted Howe, staring at her more viciously than ever.

"You know too much to bargain with; and even if you came to my terms who could tell how long you could be trusted? There is only one way out of the snarl."

"And that is?"

"Death!" he shouted, and with a leap more savage, more pantherish even, than the one he had made before, he sprung across the cabin.

Her hand was on her weapon, and she had thought that if she only knew for a surety, the knowledge would so nerve her hand that she could give the stroke of death and vengeance.

Only for a second did she have the chance. After that it was too late.

With mad strength he seized her, tore her from her feet, and flung her into a chair. Before the first shock of the assault was over he had her securely knotted to the seat, and had dragged her to the fire-place.

"Lead and steel leave ugly marks," he hissed; "and I do not care to strangle you where you sit as long as there is something better. It will not be painful, but it will be just as effectual. Say your prayers, girl, for your end has come."

He caught up a horn filled with some strange compound, and poured a generous share of its contents on the fire.

Then he darted out of the cabin, locking the door behind him, and a moment later was on the roof, closing tightly the chimney, and banging down the heavy shutter which fitted, almost air-tight, to the opening in the gable.

From the fire-place a deadly vapor swept out, filling the room, and Stella heard a savage laugh, and then the sound of departing feet, before she lapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XIII.

A REVELATION.

"STEADY, now! Who goes there?"

The challenge rung out with stern earnestness, and was accompanied by a sharp click from a cocking revolver; but the answer was a light laugh.

Then, after a momentary silence, a voice added:

"Steady yourself, Charley Briggs. I seem to be the only friend you have in these regions, and I guess we won't fall out before the night is over. We can do each other a heap of good unless I am away off."

Briggs did not seem to be so sure of the voice, for his weapon remained at a level until the chirping tones of Billy Jingle came in to set him straight.

"Pon me soul, it's ther sport ag'in. Ef he's bound ter wring in with a man ov my side I won't hinder. Let him come."

"All right. I'll take 'most anybody for a pard, if he can tell me where I am, and which way to go. I may not be lost now, but if I stayed here alone all night, blame if I believe I could find myself in the morning."

This time he did not disdain the company of the boy, and Charley Briggs was by no means displeased at the meeting.

"Glad to see you, pard," he said, as Hammond stepped forward.

"Outside of my own particular gang there's no man living I would sooner meet, because I know you have nerve, and I believe you are white. I need that kind of a

man behind me to-night; are you game for the work?"

"I never covet more of my neighbor's goods than I can win at draw poker; and I don't object to shooting a man when I have to save my life; but right there I draw the line. I'm not shooting for the fun of the thing, and I don't want to grab for any boodle except my own. And that reminds me, I have quite a fair-sized stack of yours."

"Never mind that. You can keep it till daylight, and perhaps by that time neither of us will want it."

"Very well, what do you want?"

"I want to head off the chief of the gang that has been laying for us, and to save one, who has fallen into his clutches. I suspected there was more in the riot than appeared on the surface, and now I know it, though how they spotted me, and what you have to do with the matter is more than I can yet understand. That will come later."

"If you think it is the best thing we can do you can count me in; but from what I have seen of them the Sinners are away up in the catalogue, and if I had my way I'd say, let me alone and I'll let you alone."

"Yes, but they won't. They have gone too far. And besides, there is an innocent girl in the case. It is for her sake, and not for my own, that I want to carry the war into Africa."

"A girl! Great Scott! count me in from the word go. For the sake of the sex Dell Hammond can always be counted on to be around. Who is she?"

"Her name I cannot give you, but she came to the Flat on the same coach that brought us—that brought you. Strange that others could suspect her mission and—and—we could not."

The gambler seemed to tangle himself up a little in his speech, but Dell Hammond never noticed. He was too much interested in the intelligence.

"And to think I saw her go, and never chipped. I doubted the fellow who met her, but thought she was up to running her own affairs, and let him waltz off with her. I tell you, man, I'm her friend, I'm her solid friend."

"An' as we be goin' along, pard hyer kin be 'xplainin' how ther land lays. Blowed ef I don't want ter ketch on ter ther style ov ther game meself."

Billy Jingle's suggestion was a good one, but Charley Briggs was not yet ready to explain all he knew, or thought he knew, about the game. If he had done so he would have saved something of a surprise later on, by wringing it in now.

But he gave an outline that was near enough to the truth, as far as it went. He told how the Fair Dove was supposed to be held by a man named Howe, who had obtained it from the original locator in some underhanded way which would not bear investigation, and that this young lady was the daughter of the man who had been first swindled and then, perhaps, killed.

What might not be her fate in such hands?

"If it comes to that there will be some gilt-edge shooting and no mistake," muttered the sport.

"But it must not. We can save her, and we will. Step out a little faster, and, sonny, you'll have to trot a little if you want to be in at the death."

"Oh, I'll be there, old man. An' ef ther galoot don't carry Billy Jingle's brand shortly after it'll be 'cause he won't be feelin' equal to ther load. Ther brand'll be there, all ther same."

"Billy, you talk too much. Save your breath, for it's no frolic we are on, and if there is any shooting done you want to do more than break windows."

"Bones, moreover—when the time comes you bet I'll break 'em. But I'll shut my fly-

trap. Sound kerries a good ways on a still night, an' thar's no tellin' who may be in ther bushes."

In silence they strode along for quite a while. Charley Briggs seemed never to be at fault, though the trail leading to the Fair Dove Mine was at times a tangled one. About the time they were beginning to weary of the journey, and wonder when it was to come to an end, they saw a momentary gleam of light in the distance, and toward it Briggs pointed.

"There is the cabin at the mine, and we are none too early on the spot. He is already there."

They hastened their pace, but were more cautious than ever. The light had vanished, and it did not reappear again. Perhaps Morris Howe was there; and, again, he might have retreated and taken his prisoner along with him."

So silently did they advance that Morris Howe did not hear them as he came rushing away from the cabin.

Perhaps he had ears for nothing but the last despairing cry which he expected to hear pealing up from the lips of the girl he had left to her doom.

"Is he going away from the girl; or, is he going to her?" asked Briggs, his voice low and husky, but his hand, where it rested on the arm of his companion, clenching until it seemed to be seeking to reach the bone.

"One of us had better go for the light, and the other follow him. I could drop him, and I would, but if he has her hidden away in one of these holes in the ground it might be long enough for her to starve before we could find her."

"Which shall be which? Take your choice, and take it quickly."

"I'll follow, for that's more in my line, I reckon. If you need me, sing out loud and I'll be with you."

"They don't count me in nowhere," whined Billy Jingle.

"An' me a-yearnin' fur fun all ther time. Serve 'em right ef I jest split meself, an' went with all both ov 'em. I'll be ding-donged ef I don't b'lieve I'll try it."

While the boy stood there considering how that impossible feat was to be performed his companions were stealing forward, each in the direction he had elected to go. The lad was about equally drawn in either direction, and so moved in neither. He might have stood there until daylight had it not been for the signal which Charley Briggs gave as he neared the cabin. He had heard a weak, smothered voice within:

"Help! Murder! Help!"

Stella Stone had recovered her senses long enough to utter that cry, and then was again silent.

But that one cry was enough. It hastened Briggs, and really brought Dell Hammond. It would have brought Billy Jingle, too, if the thought had not struck him to watch that some one who was not wanted did not come also. Hammond, in his haste, was leaving his rear unguarded, and what was to hinder Morris Howe from taking the back track also.

Billy slid to one side when Hammond rushed past him, and waited to see what else was to come.

Briggs was already flinging himself against the door in an apparently vain effort to burst it open, and Hammond, thinking he saw a better way, spent no time in assisting him, but swung himself up on the roof.

Dim as was the light he could see the outlines of the top of the chimney, and thought it would be an avenue by which he might soonest gain an entrance.

Something to his surprise he found the top almost hermetically sealed, but when he tore away the covering there was an opening large enough to admit of the descent of two or three men.

Without a moment's hesitation he thrust

his feet into the aperture and allowed himself to slip downward. The flue was not tall, the heat was not great, and he did not take time to consider the nature of the smoke which came rolling out.

Before he reached the bottom of that chimney he began to believe he had better waited a moment. The opening of the top was followed by a draft upward, and brief as was the passage he thought he could not live through it.

When he reached the hearth below he bounded lightly over the fire which was leaping once more into a blaze, and with outstretched hands went groping through the room, calling as he went:

"Where are you, Stella? Speak! We are friends, come to the rescue."

Then, as the door, at last giving way under Charley Briggs's attack, came bursting inward, the smoke and the fumes overpowered him, and he fell back himself at the instant Charley was leaping over the threshold.

The last comer was in no danger.

A gust from the night came sweeping in with him, and the air was growing pure so rapidly he scarcely noticed that which had overpowered his companion. The fire, too, leaping up into a flame, now revealed the interior of the cabin.

Dell Hammond, pale, ghastly, and prone upon the floor was the first object to meet his eyes.

The next was Stella, herself, bound and motionless. If she was not dead she looked like a corpse indeed.

He sprung to her side with a snarl of fury, and tore the rope away from around her form. Fate and his nimble fingers were in his favor, and the knots scarcely delayed him. He caught up the figure in his arms, and staggered with her to the door.

Then, he brought her face below his own, and gazing downward kissed her once, twice, a dozen times, and there were tears streaming from his eyes to fall upon her own.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SAINT'S WAY OF CARRYING ON HIS MISSION.

"HALT, Mister Man! I've got yer kivered with poppers, an' ef yer don't throw up yer han's I'll put ther brand on."

The challenge came from Billy Jingle, and the party addressed was a man who came hurrying along the trail, heading directly toward the cabin.

Billy had no very clear idea of what Morris Howe looked like, nor was he able to see at all plainly this late arrival, but he strongly suspected him to be the present holder of the Fair Dove. At all events, he thought it would do no harm to stop him.

The man halted; but it did not seem as though it was because of the shrill order.

A gentle glow appeared in the now open door of the cabin, and framed and surrounded with that glow could be seen the scene described at the close of the last chapter.

"Looks ez big ez a rhynoscurosus, an' I'll be ding-donged ef I b'leve he heard me at all. Are it Morris, an' shell I letter blizzard?"

It would have been pretty hard to miss at that distance, with his pistols pointing straight for the center of the man's back, but reckless though he was, something seemed to hold the boy's fingers.

"Don't wonder he's struck all in a heap, an' I must say Briggsy are takin' a ongentlemanly advantage; but all ther same it won't do ter let this loon jump in. Lay down, pious friend, an' think it over."

So ran his thoughts, for he had been stealing nearer, and at the last moment recognized the man as the individual who had been at the bottom of the first racket at the Gates of Glory Saloon.

Hastily he thrust away his pistols, and

with open hands gave a sharp blow behind the knees of Giant Jack. Then, springing up, he caught the Saint from Side Ace by the collar, and thrust his knees vigorously into the small of that individual's back.

It was all done with so much rapidity, strength and skill, he accomplished what stouter and older men had failed to do. Taken altogether off his guard, Giant Jim succumbed to the attack, and came lumbering to the ground.

Billy was too wise to allow the Saint to get hold of him, and was watching that he did not get caught in the fall.

Quickly he sprang aside, and then rushed toward the cabin.

A glance told him that the pair was no longer in the doorway, and casting his eyes around he saw Charley Briggs staggering away with the form of the still insensible girl over his shoulder.

He darted toward them, intending to give Charley a pointer as to the presence of the man he had just overthrown, but for once luck was against him. His foot struck against a root or a stone, and he fell headlong.

Billy's head was hard or it might have been cracked by the blow it got. As it was, he staggered to his feet in a rather dazed condition, and seeing nothing of the pair hurried toward the spot where he had last noted them. They could not have gone far in that brief time, and he had no doubt he could overtake them in a minute.

The minute turned out to be a pretty long one, and meantime Giant Jim was not idle.

He lay for an instant without motion.

Seeing that nothing followed the assault he slowly regained his feet and started straight for the doorway, that was still to be seen in the glow, which was now, if anything, brighter than before.

Not the least sign of anger did he show, and one would have thought, seeing how unmoved he was, that possibly he had taken his tumble through some misstep of his own.

"It was little Stella," he was muttering.

"The villain had his arms around her. He would kill her, soul and body, just as he thinks he has killed me. He has gone back into the shanty, but I'll have him out of there."

Without fear or caution he made his way to the low doorstep, and looked into the room.

At first he thought there was no one there.

Then, he saw the figure of the Tie-to Sport, stretched out upon the floor.

"Could it have been all a dream? Was it a temptation from the Evil One to rush blindly forward to strike, and aim, and slay? Verily, it seem like it, for the face of this young man is familiar, yet it is not the one I saw but a bit ago. Perhaps it was all an illusion. Why should my daughter be here? She died long ago—years before I did. It was to fit myself to join her that I became the Saint from High Ace. And now—"

He looked downward at the sport, who was beginning to gasp with returning consciousness. The sounds attracted his attention, but something else riveted his gaze. There was a paper lying on the floor, just under Hammond's outstretched arms. Perhaps it had a familiar look; it may have been because when a man is in doubt he is apt to wander off on any side issue which presents itself.

The giant leaned over the prostrate sport, picked up the document, and bending toward the fire-light glanced over the folded page.

It was the paper taken from Meg Brandon, and which had been handed over to Stella by the chief of the road-agents. In the slight struggle with Howe it had been displaced from her bosom, and had fallen unnoticed to the floor.

"Ha! This paper! At last! Yet what to make of it all? This man is not Morris-

Howe, but he must be deep in his plots. What has happened here? I will twist the truth out of him, or burn him on his own hearth. Here, you, where got you this paper, and whither has Stella gone?"

The sport gave no answer, and Giant Jim was hardly in the frame of mind to be patient. The rope which had bound Stella to the chair was lying near, and was suggestive.

He caught up a loose end and brought it around the sport's neck, ready to make the noose, and then, seating himself on the breast of Dell he glanced downward at the face into which color was beginning to return.

"Yes," muttered Giant Jim as he clutched tightly at the rope; "I am tired fighting fancies, and this brain of mine must have a rest. I'll know the facts now, or, the noose draws tight."

CHAPTER XV.

BILLY JINGLE TO THE FRONT.

"SAY, sport, let up er I'll hev ter clap ther brand on!"

Billy Jingle came rushing into the cabin, just as the reviving Hammond, looking upward, for the first time caught the glare of Giant Jim's eyes searching down for his own, and heard him hissing:

"How got you that paper; and *where is my daughter?*"

James never heard the boy. He was bending eagerly down to catch the answer he expected to drop from those whitened lips.

Had he been less wild he might have understood that in the feeble state of the young man he was crushing the life away with his weight.

And Dell, reviving from the deadly effects of the strangling smoke, fancied the lowering face above him was a figment of a nightmare which would float away now he was awakening. He drew his hands up, and struggled like a man in a dream.

"Answer!" shouted the Saint, and gave the rope a twitch which brought the noose more tightly to place. A little tighter and it would shut off the breath altogether.

If the sport could not understand him Billy Jingle did.

"That cuts ther brandin' act out altogether. Synnergogues an' sunflowers! ther man's her dad. An' ef I don't do s'umthin' ther sport are gone afore I kin git him ter onderstand."

The giant was no more aware of the presence of the boy than he had been when Billy so successfully attacked him, but the situation was not the same, and had it been, the boy would not have been as ready to fall back on his revolvers if things went wrong. That there was a misunderstanding he was pretty sure, and what he wanted was to see some way to bring it to an end without running too desperate chances in attempting it.

Once more Hammond was motionless; but the boy was shrewd. Unless he was mistaken badly Dell was playing 'possum, and trying to gather strength for another effort.

If that was the case—and it would not take long to find out—Billy intended to have a hand in the next struggle. He slipped behind the giant, gathered up the other end of the rope, and made a noose likewise.

Then, grinning so widely that it was almost audible, he tip-toed closer still, and with the loop held over the head of Guyon James he waited the next movement.

Suddenly, Hammond seemed galvanized into life. He slung his fists out at the body of the man who was seated on him, and they did not fail to reach. He caught the rope with one hand, and then tried to fling himself around face downward, so that he could get some purchase. He was active as a panther, and strong as a bear, to put it according to Billy Jingle's thoughts.

The boy wasted no time in admiration.

Thought and action with him went together. The noose dropped and tightened, and as Dell Hammond threw his hardest strain into an effort, Billy plunged backward, fairly lifting Giant Jim from his seat.

With that, Hammond slipped out from his uncomfortable position, wrenching the rope from the hand of James as he went, and was on his feet, weak, staggering, but very much himself. Had it not been for the presence of the boy the days of Giant Jim would have been numbered.

"Hold on, sport, hold on!" Billy shouted, in shrillest earnest.

"It's ther gal's dad, an' he don't sabbe, that's all. We kin fix it all right ez a trivett ef he'll jest open his ears ter reason. Ef he don't it'll be time ernuf ter knock him down with er club."

Billy Jingle sprung back out of reach the moment he had seen the sport slip from under the giant, and now that neither was in immediate danger he wanted to have the two come to an understanding. There was a chance they would need each the support of the other. If he had not found Charley Briggs when he searched for him, a few minutes ago, he had heard voices, that made him think Morris Howe was coming again, and his gang coming with him.

Guyon James passed his hand wearily over his brow.

The sudden check he had received, instead of rendering him wilder, appeared to have had a calming effect. He no longer overlooked the presence of the boy, but stared at him from under his raised hand as though bringing back the face to his memory by an effort.

When he spoke his voice had lost its late fierceness, and had returned to its ordinary calmness.

"Pardon me, friends, if friends you may be. Verily, it seems I have been the victim of a delusion, and under its influence have been acting in a way unseemly for one who has been named the Saint from Side Ace. If there is anything I should hear—as, by the speech of this lad, whom I recognize as the son of one Hiram Strange, who once lived at Side Ace—speak it quickly, for my mind misgives me that startling things may be expected to happen."

"Startling if indeed you are the father of Stella Stone," answered Hammond, looking around him for traces of Charley Briggs and the girl.

"You can see for yourself what sort of a death-trap Morris Howe had her fastened in. It might not have hurt her, but it almost did for me; and I'm not supposed to be of the soft-shell kind, either. What became of her and Charley this boy can tell you, perhaps. They seem to have got a move on without much reference to me."

"Oh, I reckon they will come out all siren. But ther last I seen of her she did not look like a corpus, an' Briggsy war a-kerryin' ov her to'rads ther bresh. I don't think jest ser much ov his grit, but fur brains an' motion he's ez good ez ther next."

"And who is this Briggs? By what right does he take her in his arms?"

"Oh, he's a sport from 'wayback, an' when he knowed ther game he brung us out hyer a-'hoopin'. Wouldn't wonder ef he war sweet on her; but ef so, you bet it's all on ther squar'. P'rhaps it's ez good a time ez any ter remark thet Morris are returnin', an' his gang come with him. What yer all goin' ter do about it? Speak quick, er climb ther golden stairs at a two-ten gait."

The boy's warning reached their ears at about the same instant certain sounds called their attention to the outside.

The boy's suspicion was correct, moreover.

The gang from the Flat who trained in his interests had reached the mine, on the trail of the fugitives, and Howe, seeing from a distance the open door, was leading

them up to where he would have use for them.

"But, my daughter—where is she? Which way shall we go? What shall we do? She must not fall into their hands again? Ah! I think I hear her now! To the rescue!"

The appeal was unfortunate after a certain fashion.

The others listened, while the Saint dashed out through the open door.

They did indeed hear what seemed to be the cry of a woman; but it was cut short by the crack of a revolver. The appearance of Giant Jim had drawn a shot from the first of half a dozen men who were dashing up outside.

The bullet sped true to its aim, and the Saint pitched heavily forward and downward in his tracks.

"Forward, boys!" shouted Howe, himself springing to the front.

"They are trying to jump the mine; down every man that you see. They are all paid for."

He had seen the open door, and knew the girl could not have escaped unaided. His idea was to wipe out all evidence of his crime, if it had been successful; to finish it up in the grand hurrah if it had not been.

He recognized the man who sprung out, and it was his hand halted him. He thought, also, he had heard the voice of the girl he had left caged there to die, but was unwilling to believe she had passed out from the cabin. Had he looked a little to the right he would have seen her in life and strength, blindly rushing away from the outstretched arms of one who pursued her.

Her course was taking her straight back to the cabin; and even the sound of the shot did not serve to check her.

What had happened seemed to her both strange and terrible.

She had closed her eyes to the world, as she supposed for the last time. When she opened them again she found herself in the arms of a stranger, who held her tightly, and was calling her by names which frightened her, and which she could not understand. As she recovered strength there came the thought that this was the prime mover of the plot to which she had been a victim, and in mad excitement she broke away.

Had she chosen a route it would not, certainly, have led her to the cabin; but fate or chance chose it for her, and once started she neither knew nor cared which way she was going, so long as she kept up successful flight.

As she would have passed the door of the building she tripped over the body there, and fell with a sharp cry of fright. As she tried to regain her footing it seemed to her that men rose up all around her; she heard a crash of firearms, and then, some one was dragging her back into the cabin, and the door was closed with a crash, just in time to stop the rush of Morris Howe and his men.

Inside the hut were two wounded. Charley Briggs had managed to crawl in though hard hit, and Billy Jingle had moved the giant, though it seemed like a mouse at work on a mountain. Dell Hammond and Billy Jingle kept close watch through a couple of loopholes they had found and opened.

As for Stella, it was the hand of Hammond which had drawn her to present safety.

"I sling ca'tridges 'round so loose it's al ers a p'int ter keep a good stock on hand," said Billy, as he coolly began to recharge his pistol from a handful of cartridges he had drawn from his pocket.

"Ef yourn are a 44 cal., an' yer hev ary occashun you better fill her up now. From what I know an' kin see I reckon they'll be comin' soon, an' in this hyer light ther's a chance ter lose more ner one shot."

Hammond's revolver was all right, and he answered:

"I think they will hold off a bit and try to see what is ahead of them. You keep

a lookout while I look our pards here over and see how bad they're hurt. If you think they are starting in on a rush let me know."

Now that they had got down to business at last Hammond was as cool as the coolest, and though he did not think very much of the boy's capacity as a pistol-shot he was willing to make use of him at a pinch.

Hastily he looked over Giant Jim, and muttered:

"If there's nothing more than I can see on the surface he will keep till after the frolic, and perhaps will join in on the grand chorus at the close. Now, let's see how Briggs has fared. I begin to suspect he is worst off of all. If he had played a straight game, confound him, it might have saved him getting plugged."

He bent down, took a useless arm in his hand, heard a few words that ended in a low moan, and then started back with a gesture of surprise.

At the same time, Billy Jingle, from his post of observation shouted:

"Hyer they come!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BILLY JINGLE'S BRAND, AND THE MEETING DISSOLVES.

HALF a dozen desperadoes to one man and a boy looked like long odds, but the smaller party had the advantage in position, and unless they could be surprised it was pretty certain, so long as they fought as best they knew how, they could not be routed by a charge without considerable loss.

But Morris Howe did not know exactly who the defenders were, or how much damage had been done to them, and the charge that was driving up to the cabin was made more for the purpose of finding out than through a hope of immediate success.

If he had only known it, the Tie To Sport was a past master with the pistol, and could have brought them down one at a time between the moment of coming within range, and the time of their closing in on him. It was not fear for himself that caused him to utter a challenge. Nothing could have suited him better than a wild attack upon the stout walls of the little cabin.

"Let up, there, Morris, if that's your name. I hate to slaughter, but if you crowd me I swear I'll slay. I can drop every man-jack of you before you can reach this door, and if you come on after the warning I'll do it, too."

The answer was promptly given.

"You are the man who shot Dave Johnson when he wa'n't looking. That's your style of work. We ain't afraid that you'll show much fight when it comes face to face with men. If you surrender we'll take you back to town and give you a fair trial. If you don't, we'll have you out of there before you know what's coming, and hang you before you can wink twice. Throw up, or shut up."

"And what will I be doing? I never pulled trigger on Johnson, but let that go. Move off, and give us a fair roadway, and you can find us at the Flat to-morrow, ready for all the law may direct. Crowd us, and you take what you get."

"An' it war my popper ez slapped ther brand on Davy when he war shootin' at a man ez looked ther other way. I'm ther son ov Hiram Strager, ov Side Ace, Morris Howe, an' yer orter know w'ot that means. You killed my dad, an' I'm jest a-yearnin' ter kill you. Ef yer white, step to ther front an' hev your gang go to ther rear. Then, you an me'll settle this, man ter man."

Billy Jingle was having his little say-so, and he said it with such vicious rapidity there was no choking him off until he had finished.

To him Howe vouchsafed no answer.

"Stranger, you may not know it, but you

have jumped my claim. That's *my* shanty you are in, and I reckon the law allows me to get you out. If you come feet first there's no one but what will say, served you right."

"Liari!" thinly screamed a voice as yet unheard.

Giant Jim had dragged himself to the door and was speaking through one of the loopholes his own hand had long before fashioned.

"It is *my* claim. Every dime you ever loaned me was paid before you dragged me down and killed me as you thought. I have the papers to prove it. I am in my right mind now, and whether I live or die you'll never hold the Fair Dove again."

Down in a heap he fell as he said this, but he was not dead yet, and the defiance seemed to have an effect. The men without not only halted but they fell back a pace or two, and huddled together. They were gathered in a little knot, and from appearances were discussing the situation.

To Daisy Dell the situation seemed suspicious. If Howe had continued to bluff he would have been better satisfied. So long as they held the cabin Morris Howe and his men might raven around on the outside; but what if they were driven out?

Somehow, the huddled little crowd did not look as large as it should, and with a whispered order to Billy to keep careful watch in front he moved over to the other end of the cabin.

He was in time to discover, but not soon enough to prevent.

With a crackle and roar a sheet of flame rushed up the side of the building, and at the same time the cabin began to fill with a smoke like that from a Chinese stink-pot. Morris Howe had been taking no chances. He intended to drive them out into the open where six to one would soon end the game.

Against that they had the chances of death where they were.

In the East the dawn was ready to break, but in front of it lay the deeper darkness of the hour, rendered more intense by the flare from the fire in the rear of the cabin. Prime expert though he might be, Dell Hammond could do nothing with his pistols, and there were but a few moments left him to decide on his course.

"Keep your head now, Billy. There's but one thing for you to do. I'll make a rush and go for them. Perhaps I can take them all in; perhaps I can't. When you see me getting down to work, and them all busy, throw the door open and commence hauling these out. You will probably have a chance to put a brand on two or three of the gang that's setting things up behind the house. If I get through all right, good enough. If I don't, save what you can of the outfit, and perhaps you had better begin with the girl. She's an old friend of mine, Billy, though perhaps you wouldn't think it, and if you help her out of the hole you'll do me proud."

The gang was edging up as he cautiously opened the door a little and sidled out.

Then, with a revolver in either hand he rushed toward the crowd.

Morris Howe was kneeling a little in advance. His left elbow pressed against his side, and from the rest he took steady aim at the figure of the Tie-To Sport.

The advantage of the light was all against him, but Hammond knew he must take chances, and did not hold his fire a second after he thought he was within range. Had he seen the crouching figure of the mine-jumper he might have made an ending then and there. First with the right, and then with the left, he fired a shot; and then, Morris pulled his trigger.

A shout arose, and a rush followed, as Daisy Dell threw his hands straight out and pitched forward. With him down Howe was up and leading the charge.

"All right fur you, p'raps, but hyer's *my* brand," squeaked Billy Jingle, his voice rising shrilly above the hurrah.

"Thar ye hev it, an' how do yer like it? That's one fur dad."

Morris Howe never knew what struck him, and as he stumbled and fell Dell Hammond rose again, while a sharp voice which as yet had not been heard in the racket broke in:

"What's going on hyer, an' whar do yer expect me ter come in at? You Sinners ov ther Flat, yer drove me out once, when I war a honest man, an' I orter ter kim back on yer hard when I got ther chaince. Pick up yer boss an' travel, er me an' my men will let go."

It was Captain Brand who was talking, and at his back were half a dozen of his men. Whatever had been his record of late, just now he had appeared on the side of the right, and meant every word he said.

With Morris down the man known as Mariposa Mike stepped to the front as leader and spokesman.

"They say you are square, Adam, and I'll swear to it you used to be. That's a fair bargain, and we'll take you at your word. You have the biggest crowd, and we're not altogether sure of the rights of this thing anyway. We'll get back to town with our corpses, and you can come in in the morning and tell the boys just how things ought to be. They'll give you a warm welcome. For the present, just count us out."

Captain Brand allowed him to make his speech to its end, but watched closely to see that no game lurked behind it. When they gathered up their fallen comrades and departed he turned his attention to the little hospital he had on his hands.

Billy Jingle had passed through unharmed, but the rest were all more or less deeply bitten with the lead.

Giant Jim was Guyon James no longer. From the time he received the wound which stretched him out in front of the cabin he was once more the Guyon Stone who had found the Fair Dove. Howe had done better for him than he knew. In after years there was a fortune in the mine which so far had been little more than developed.

The Tie-To Sport was barely scratched. He dodged at the flash, and had not Captain Brand taken the contract off his hands he would have been up and giving a good account of himself. What he said to Stella, when she had at last drawn herself away from her father's arms, may explain all that need be said.

"You sent me away from you for good, as you said, and boasted that you were going to solve a mystery, and take care of yourself till it was done. I'll swear I had given you up in despair, but it strikes me I came in mighty handy to the end."

"For that you have my thanks," she answered, blushing as he spoke.

"But if you had come a little sooner it might have saved some of this bloodshed. And—who—who is *that* man?"

She nodded with her head slightly, and the direction of her head was toward Briggs, who, pale but reviving, crouched against the side of the cabin.

"Charley Briggs, sport at large, so far as I know. If he has anything more to tell you I'll find out and let you know. For the presesnt you had better take care of your father."

He moved over to the gambler.

"Oh, I'm all right, sport," muttered Briggs as he came. "Help me out of this."

"As well as I can, but I reckon you may as well understand I know you for Meg Brandon, the lady of the Gates of Glory. Just how you intended to profit by this mix I don't understand, but, you must know your chance is over."

"Yes, yes. And I will tell you further, I was once Guyon Stone's wife. *Yonder girl is my daughter.* I had thought them both dead and would have gathered in the Fair Dove for myself. That is over now. They must never know. Help me away that I can

hide myself. Stella Stone must never blush for the unfortunate woman who was her mother. And for that ten thousand you are holding—keep it for her. As it looks now, you'll not regret giving it up."

For the moment the woman broke down; later on, the sport asserted itself, and with the help of Dell Hammond she stole away. When the Stones came into the Flat a few days later the Gates of Glory had a new proprietor, and Meg Brandon was no more to be heard of. Stella never knew.

After seeing his pard was no longer in danger Brand did not linger long.

"Good-by, old man," he said, as he shook Stone's hand at parting.

"I'm not particularly a saint, myself, but I couldn't help but see my pard through, what had always used me white. Ther less you see ov me now ther better, an' ez you're back hyer I'll hev bizzness in some other d'reckshun. It might work you trouble ef I stayed 'round hyer."

And Billy Jingle, refusing all offers of protection and assistance, said his say, and departed likewise.

"Thankee, pards, I jest kim down ter find me man an clap ther brand on. I've evened up fur dad, now, an' I'll go back ter Side Ace an' live a life ov virtue an' repentance."

And with this the record closes.

THE END.

Next Half-Dime Library, No. 852.

Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Devil's Gulch;

OR,

PETE PARROT,

The Boss Masher from Mashersville.

BY E. L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

PETE PARROT AND POLL.

It was a glorious night, in Devil's Gulch, Nevada, and one long to be remembered, as it was to witness the first marriage that had ever taken place in the camp.

As Uncle Charley Copeland said, and he was an authority, being the oldest man in the place, "Thar's goin' ter be a roarin' ruction in Devil's Gulch to-night."

The event was the marriage of Miss Nora Sage to her father's mine-superintendent, Burt Bradford.

Burt was one of the most popular young men in that region, and Miss Nora was one of the prettiest girls in all the State.

Samuel Sage, the principal mine-owner at Devil's Gulch, had been very successful in his ventures and had arranged that the wedding should come off in the best style that circumstances would permit.

Every one had been invited who was known to possess a white shirt.

A minister had been engaged, from Virginia City, to do the "splicing."

A brass band had also been engaged to furnish the music.

Samuel occupied the finest and largest residence in the camp, and it was surrounded by a spacious, well-kept lawn.

On this lawn a dancing platform had been arranged, and Chinese lanterns were strung about in profusion—which, for Devil's Gulch, was certainly a great novelty.

Mr. Sage had likewise brought a chef from Virginia City to arrange the supper, and had provided pounds and pounds of red-fire, with which to illuminate the grounds.

Pending the time for the guests to assemble, a number of the citizens were congregated in Three-Fingered Jack's saloon, bracing up for the evening.

Three-Fingered Jack was somewhat of a celebrity, having been born with only three fingers, on his right hand, and, truth to tell, he catered to the worst element.

It was especially understood that no one would be admitted to the Sage grounds, who did not have his hair and beard combed, his boots blackened, and wear a white shirt and

collar, consequently, there was a lively demand for shirts and collars.

But Levi, the local clothing merchant, had only a limited supply, and these were soon gone; hence a number were barred from attending the festivities, and filling up on Sage's wines and "honest" liquor.

The grounds in which the Sage mansion was located had been specially laid out by an experienced landscape gardener, and rivaled anything in Nevada of its kind.

There were plenty of trees, and ornate shrubbery, and flower-beds that filled the air with delicious odor.

The house, too, as a piece of modern architecture, was pleasant to the eye.

The lawn was threaded with graveled walks, and the grass, always kept mown short, was as soft as velvet.

To-night both lawn and walks were well filled with people, in their best attire, and the broad piazza fairly swarmed with guests.

The Virginia City band was discoursing good music. A Punch and Judy man, and others, who had in an inexplicable manner gotten into the grounds, were "raking in the shekels."

Among the lot was a fakir, who was performing tricks of magic, before a mystified and enthusiastic audience.

He was about twenty-two years of age, and was as good-looking a young man as had ever shown his face in Devil's Gulch.

He stood five-foot-ten; was of muscular build; his face was of pure Anglo-Saxon cast; his hair and eyes dark and scintillant.

His dress was a fine suit of broadcloth, white shirt, collar and tie, a silk hat and patent-leather shoes.

He had established his stock of implements upon a common deal table, and was busily engaged in puzzling his audience with his sleight of hand business, when he was suddenly interrupted by Samuel Sage's arrival on the ground, in company with his brother, "Shorty," (Silas) Sage.

The mine-owner and the magician eyed each other for a moment, inquiringly, before speaking.

Samuel Sage was a man of large physique, was well up in his fifties in age, and was of rather overbearing presence, or manner.

"Young man!" said Sage, "what are you doing here?"

"Amusing your guests, sir," was the reply.

"No harm, I hope?"

"Yes, a great deal of harm. This is no side-show! What's your name?"

"Magic Mose, or Moses Magic, whichever you choose. I was invited here by a friend of yours."

"Who is this friend of mine who invited you here?"

"The Honorable Peter Parrot."

Sage started back, as if thunderstruck.

"Why, confound your impudence, Pete Parrot is dead!" he cried.

"He was pretty lively when I saw him last. But, hold on! Here is something in your hat. What is it?" and reaching down into the hat, he drew forth a baby's stocking!

The crowd, that had now gathered around, roared with laughter.

"Now, that is a nice thing to be carrying in your hat," observed Magic Mose. "But, holy Jerusalem, what's this? Where have you been 'tending bar'?" And from the hat he produced two lemonade-shakers, and threw them on the floor to prove that they were tin.

Next he brought forth a nutmeg-grater, and then out came the photograph of a negress! The mine-owner was literally paralyzed with astonishment.

"What did it all mean?"

"This is infamous!" cried Sage. "You are possessed of the devil's own traps for mountebankery and imposture."

The crowd roared, while Sage made a rush at the necromancer, grabbed the hat, and turning, strode away.

But, he was gone for a few moments only, when he returned, accompanied by his three Mexican "heelers."

They were vicious-looking "Greasers," dark almost as negroes, and fully armed.

"That's the man, Pedro!" cried Sage; "put him out of the grounds!"

The Mexicans made a rush for the man of magic; but, they did not carry out their instructions, for a gigantic man headed them off, assisted by a pair of big revolvers.

It was Pete Parrot, who had suddenly appeared upon the ground, and Poll was perched upon his shoulder!

"Back! you cussed Greasers, or I'll bore a hole through ye big enough to run a railroad train through!"

"Whoopee! Hyer they cum, like a thousan'

o' cats! But, advance cats and give the countersign! Meow—Meow!" roared Pete.

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